

Chapter 1

Harry continued to look at the ceiling in his small room at the Dursley's residence, willing himself to get some sleep for the first time since his return from Hogwarts. Padfoot was in his giant dog bed off to the side, his large head resting atop his long legs as he watched his godson in concern.

It wasn't that Harry was particularly traumatized from the events of the year, even though many in his place would have been. It was just that his new habit of thinking about situations endlessly had his mind running continuously all day and every day since the headmaster had told him the prophecy. Of course, without the comforting presence of Hermione it had gotten so bad he couldn't even function any more. It had simply consumed him, and while Sirius wanted desperately to transform back to his human form, it wouldn't be possible based upon Harry's shaky record of magical detection on Privet Drive.

Finally giving up his struggle as a loss for the night Harry sat up in his bed and motioned to Padfoot to join him for a midnight snack. As the pair quietly skulked down the stairs Harry whispered, "I'm trying to sleep but my brain is running non-stop."

Sirius whined in his dog form as they walked into the kitchen. Judging by the huge pile of dishes by the sink, both Dudley and Vernon had already had their midnight 'snack' although Harry could only equate it to a feast by the appearance of things.

After getting a small bowl of crisps and a glass of water Harry grabbed some loose lunchmeat that had somehow survived the Dursley feeding frenzy. Handing Padfoot the meat he sighed as he settled into his usual seat at the table. After a few minutes of eating in silence Padfoot gave him a significant look and Harry sighed, "Professor Dumbledore told me something at the end of the year and we sort of had an argument about something. But that isn't what's bothering me; it's what he told me that's keeping me up at night. I'm working on it, I swear I am Sirius." Padfoot whined pitifully, in his own way showing his concern for Harry. Even in dog form he still felt a

tremendous amount of guilt for Harry having spent any time in this house with these horrible excuses for people, let alone muggles.

After another six hours of sleepless existence for Harry the rest of the inhabitants of Number 4 joined him amongst the waking. Harry was gazing out of his window in the early sunlight of daybreak when he heard Dudley scream through his door, "Hey freak, my mum and dad want to talk to you."

Harry groaned as Padfoot growled, shaking his head at his godfather and soon to be guardian he quietly said, "Trust me it isn't worth it Sirius." Padfoot barked softly as he watched Harry leave the room, silently wondering how many times Harry had to deal with similar behavior growing up in this house.

Harry walked into the dining room and immediately his aunt, uncle, and cousin could see evidence of his insomniac ways. While he didn't have bags under his eyes, those vivid green eyes were blood shot and appeared almost pained to stay open at the moment.

After a moment Petunia sniffed, "Vernon and I have come to a decision. Seeing as how all of the food in the house has started disappearing at night we want you to buy your own food for the rest of your week here."

Harry eyed the three warily before he shrugged and turned back around, heading back to his room to grab Sirius to do some grocery shopping for the next few days.

Just as he entered his room Hedwig flew to the ledge outside of his window, looking rather put out, apparently having been deprived of her nightly hunt to make a delivery. Harry sluggishly walked over to the window and opened it allowing Hedwig to enter the room and take a roost on his arm. He blinked slowly as it registered that his faithful familiar was carrying more than one letter.

Opening the first letter he immediately recognized that it was from Dumbledore of all people. Sighing heavily he broke the headmaster's seal on the letter and read:

Dear Mr. Potter,

Given the state of our relationship following our last discussion I realize I must earn the right to call you by your Christian name once again. That being said, you may feel free to inform your canine companion that I acted as proxy on his behalf and successfully secured his official adoption of you.

Your friends Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger are already present at Sirius's ancestral home and I believe your godfather successfully managed to tweak the arrangements enough to place your room next to theirs. The rest of Mr. Weasley's family is also staying in the house for the remainder of the summer for security concerns. It should please you to know that I have added additional guards to Ms. Granger's house and also placed some significant wards on the residence.

On to school matters, congratulations on your very good marks for the past year, your parents would have been very proud. In fact, Ms. Granger approached me while I was in headquarters yesterday and questioned me as to a waiver for your person into fifth year Arithmancy. While I regret such a waiver is against school by-laws, I can suggest you take the examination for credit at the end of the year. Many students take similar routes with independent study.

Book lists and prefect badges, if awarded should be in the mail the second week of August if no unforeseen difficulties occur. I pray you are well and if you have an opportunity while I am at headquarters I would very much like the chance to talk and clear the air between us.

A.P.W.B.D

Harry shrugged as he finished reading the letter; it brought many issues that while important he didn't feel like worrying about at the moment. The second letter Harry reasoned would have to be from Hermione considering he hadn't gotten a reply to the letter he had sent her from a few days earlier.

Harry,

Are you sleeping better than you were when you wrote me your first letter? If you aren't I suggest you try a cup of hot chamomile right before you go to bed, it has always worked for me when I couldn't

sleep back at home after a long year in the comfortable beds at Hogwarts. If you can't sleep for another reason, well we'll talk when you get here in a few days.

I heard that Sirius successfully adopted you! I'm so happy for both of you. If you could see me right now you'd be laughing at the little happy dance I'm doing for you. Ron's been less of a prat so far this summer, but he refuses to revise his notes to prepare for our OWLs at the end of the next year. But, from what the headmaster tells me, that won't be a problem for you. I'm so proud of you by the way.

On to other news, the Order won't let any of us that are still attending Hogwarts listen in on any of their meetings, but the strangest thing happened after a meeting. Professor Snape actually gave the two of us a compliment, of course Ron was referred to as the other Gryffindor, but that's not as horrid as he normally is. Maybe potions this next year won't be as bad. I hope so, because potions are so important for a lot of careers.

I'm missing you terribly, and Professor Lupin's girlfriend, Tonks has been teasing me mercilessly about being your girlfriend. When you get here we might have to play a prank on her. I also have a surprise for you, but you'll have to wait until you get here to find that out.

I love you,

Hermione

Harry managed a small but genuine smile at Hermione's letter before he turned to Padfoot and said, "I've just been informed by our housemates that we need to shop for our own groceries. I imagine we can get a small cooler and get enough food for the rest of the week to fit in it. Dog food for you I imagine?"

If a dog could give someone an indignant look, Padfoot did so in spades as Harry laughed, "Right then, no dog food. Lunch meat should be acceptable though, right." Padfoot merely nodded as he stretched out his long legs.

After digging around for a reasonable set of clothes Harry scampered over to the bathroom and managed to take a quick shower, which

seemed to invigorate him enough to get through his one errand for the day. Padfoot followed him right out the front door at Number 4, the slowly rising sun enough indication that the local grocery store wouldn't be open quite yet.

As they began to head down Privet Drive Harry glanced around and could see a few people grabbing the morning paper from their paper boxes. However, unlike in previous years a few of the neighbors smiled at him warmly and even waved. After a moment it became apparent that someone had been clearing his sullied reputation within the small community.

While Harry had no concrete explanations as to how this happened, the self satisfied smirk he caught Mrs. Figg sporting one evening as she walked past was definitely a big hint in her direction.

It had been a very warm start to the summer in Great Britain and most everyone Harry had seen were wearing shorts and as little as decently possible beyond that. Needless to say, the skinny raven haired young man with a large black dog walking by his side still managed to gain attention that they wouldn't have in a less sterile environment.

After wandering around the neighborhood until it was around 10 am Harry finally managed to reach the local grocery store. Taking care to tie Padfoot to a post and have his fake tags clearly visible, Harry entered the store just as the automatic doors opened just like magic.

At the checkout lines one girl, perhaps around twenty, and an older woman smiled and waved at Harry as he entered. After grabbing one of the baskets near the entrance Harry immediately set off to do his own grocery shopping for the first time in his life.

In a way Harry's present activity was the exact polar opposite of what he felt compelled to be doing at that very moment. Being a mere nobody in the muggle world, his entrance into the wizarding world had created two different Harry Potters in his mind. One was expected to be an overwhelming failure in his life, the consequence of having two parents that had apparently given him up. The other was expected to be the savior of this small but precious little world, failure never straying into his vocabulary as he was looked upon as a hero

for an event he really had no recollection of. The first few years of his schooling at Hogwarts had proven that he could exist in such a dichotomy, even if he wasn't terribly happy about it.

After picking out a small but passable foam cooler, Harry began to pick up the bare essentials, content in the belief that Molly Weasley would quickly cover any losses he might endure over the course of the week. After grabbing a small loaf of bread he grabbed enough lunchmeat to cover both his and Padfoot's needs for the next few days. Spotting a gallon of water he checked for its fit in the cooler before adding it as his final purchase in his basket.

Pulling out the small wad of bills he had in his wallet, Harry did some quick math pulling the twenty pound note out of the wad before placing them back in the billfold. Walking up to the younger woman he slowly began to pile the various things from his basket before he asked, "Where do you have your smallest bags of ice?"

The girl smiled warmly, almost a little too warmly as she replied, "They're just outside the entrance. How big of a bag would you like?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair, still not completely accustomed to being offered a choice in anything as he replied, "Your smallest bag should be fine thanks."

The woman nodded as she rang everything up before she said the amount which the twenty pound note covered with ease. After taking his change and placing it in his wallet he took the cooler from his bag and walked outside to grab his bag of ice. With a wry grin he managed to barely fit the bag of ice in the cooler, thus ensuring it wouldn't all melt before he made it back to Number 4.

The walk back to Privet drive was much more direct in order to preserve all of the lunch meat they had purchased. Walking straight through the front door Harry ran up to his room, starting to sweat from the beginnings of the mid day heat that was hitting the area.

Opening the cooler Harry took enough ice to fill the one glass the Dursleys had allotted him for his one week stay. With some creative ice manipulation Harry managed to get the lunch meat firmly ensconced in the cooler before closing it to preserve the precious

quantities it protected. Harry unscrewed the cap from his jug of water and poured some of its contents into his glass before taking a big swig. Ice water was a luxury he had not expected to have during his week with the Dursleys.

After he finished his water Harry reapplied his stick of muggle deodorant; while at Hogwarts there were personal hygiene charms that could deal with such a situation. As he finished Harry began to think of something productive he could do the rest of his stay at Privet Drive.

The prophecy wasn't the kind of thing he could waste any more energy fretting over, OWL review could hold until he saw Hermione, and doing his summer assignments was much the same. After some long thought Harry decided he would start running if he got too stir crazy, he was already in pretty good shape following the tournament and a spot of running couldn't hurt.

With his first true smile since he had arrived in Surrey Harry actually thought he might manage some sleep tonight.

That night Harry did manage to sleep for the first time in four days, and when he awoke the next morning he felt refreshed and content to have his focus drawn away from more pressing matters. As far as he was concerned, denial was his word for the week and he would use it whenever things would get to be too much.

After making himself a ham sandwich for breakfast Harry turned to Padfoot, who had also managed to sleep through the night, before he said, "Up for a run today Paddy?"

The whining bark that answered him was enough to make Harry laugh, "You are one lazy dog you know that? I think you're worse than Crookshanks, and that's saying something."

Padfoot eyed Harry balefully before finally getting out of his bed and stretching in a way that only a long legged dog could. Sirius was well aware that he had been a little less energetic in his animagus form than he used to be, but it wasn't like he was getting any younger and missing sleep for a few days caught up to him faster than it used to.

Changing into a pair of shorts and a cut off t-shirt emblazoned with the symbol for Gryffindor house, Harry laced up his trainers and gave Padfoot a good rub on the head before they quietly exited his room and the house. After Harry affixed the long leash to Padfoot's collar the pair took off at jog for parts unknown into the early morning summer heat.

After a lengthy jog that Harry figured was around five miles the pair entered the nearby Surrey Park for a drink of water and perhaps to mess around with Dudley and his gang. After successfully being hydrated Harry crouched down and as he rubbed Padfoot he noticed Dudley and his friends across the park picking on some kids that looked to be a couple of years younger. Both shared a glance over at the bullies and decided it was time to strike back in some small measure.

Harry was no longer the malnourished and abused boy that he had been in his formative years, in fact a casual observer would call him wiry and athletic; a stark contrast to the mostly overweight and cumbersome bullies consisting of Big D and his gang.

Harry walked into sight just as the gang finished their harassment of a girl probably 13-years-old, as tears streamed down her face. Harry quietly but in a menacing voice said, "I suggest you leave her alone, unless you want me to strip the skin clean off your bones."

A few of the tamer members of the gang actually took an involuntary step backwards simply at the tone of Harry's voice. Incidentally, they were also the smartest members of the gang, Big D included.

Piers Polkiss, a scrawny rat faced kid only second to Dudley on the food chain snarled, "Stuff it Potter, or we'll see just how well they teach the kids at St. Brutus' how to bleed."

Harry rolled his eyes and let loose a long suffering sigh and dryly said, "Wow that was a long sentence for you Piers. You better rest up for a bit while someone else does the rest of the talking."

Two of the newer beefy members of the gang cracked their knuckles menacingly at Harry as the younger girl and her two friends, boys around the same age, finally managed to shake off their surprise that

someone had actually rescued them as they scampered off into another part of the park.

Dudley finally gathered his limited wits and said, "I've had it already with your stupid freakishness this summer. I think it's time we taught you a lesson, about respecting your betters."

Harry merely shook his head as Dudley waved his hand, and in a move eerily reminiscent of a campy action movie, the two nearest 'henchman' began to approach him looking menacing. Just as the first one was about to throw a punch Padfoot came bounding between them and growled threateningly at the two boys. Seeing as how Padfoot struck a very mean looking dog when he wanted to, the two teens whimpered and turned tail as fast as they could move. Calling it running would have been far too cruel to people who actually did run on occasion.

With two of their gang already running for the hills the rest showed their true loyalties leaving Dudley and Piers remaining. The odd feeling that if they did choose to fight it would have to be with even numbers had clearly unsettled the two remaining bullies and they couldn't string any sounds aside from the occasional 'erm' or 'um'.

Finally, Harry took pity on them and said, "If you leave now, we won't kick your sorry arses. I'm sure that's a promise you never make to all of the little kids you bully every day."

A moment later Dudley and Piers were scampering away from the park, suddenly thankful that someone had shown them the mercy they refused to others so many times before. As Harry watched the pair that had caused him so much pain growing up, the pair that had cost him any chance at making friends; or creating a world free of the bigotry and cruelty of his aunt and uncle, they were now beneath him in a way they would never understand.

Taking the high road might not have been easy, but it gave him such a stunningly simple but powerful insight into his very being that he wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. Feeling lighter than he had in years, in fact lighter than he had ever felt in his life he said, "That's it, isn't it? That's the power in turning the other cheek." If Harry's

thoughts were filled with wonder, Sirius' were filled with wonder of a different kind.

It's true Sirius wasn't exactly following Harry's blindingly bright moment of clarity, in fact with the added boost of being in his animal form he was still in the throes of the flight or fight response that he had spent much of the last two years in as he was a fugitive of the law. In a way it was almost a comforting companion for him, it was predictable and unlike so many other things in his life, had yet to let him down. He had spent nearly half of his life fighting to have what he did at the moment, and in a way it left him feeling empty in a way that he had never expected.

If he had a time turner powerful enough to go back to and ask his past self one question, it would be:

"Where the hell did you go wrong you buggered up fool?"

He, James, Remus, Lily, and if you put a wand to his head even Peter all had such bright hopes for the future and what had come from them?

James and Lily dead long before they should have been, Remus forced to turn favors for his other school friends to keep steady room and board, he was in Azkaban as much for his own blinding anger as for Pettigrew's duplicity, and Peter the little rat spent far too many years in his form and now finally he would be paying for his part in the ultimate betrayal.

In fact, the only thing positive that actually came from the Marauders was Harry, and after only a few days with the Dursleys he had a vague idea of the pain and loveless environment that his godson had been forced to grow up in.

So Sirius had asked himself over the last few days, if he could have spared himself the pain of the last fourteen years, would he? Then the answer would be staring him right in the face, the face of James with Lily's eyes was all the answer, all the reason he ever needed to soldier on. He would see his true family again, but not before he watched Harry grow into the remarkable young man his parents would have wanted.

Feeling his heart slow from the excitement of the past few minutes a happy bark greeted Harry as the pair walked back to Number 4, one day closer to being free of the horrid people for another year.

Whether it had come from the terrified mouth of Dudley or if the Dursley family as a whole finally understood just why it was a terribly poor idea to needlessly berate and anger a pair of wizards, Harry had found it rather amusing initially that he had cowed the Dursleys. Not with magic but with one simple action, forgiveness, even if it wasn't deserved.

The days quickly passed as Harry and Sirius continued their daily routine of running, even when it rained heavily the next to last day at Number 4. A day in the rain was really much preferable to another day stuck to the confines of the Dursleys residence.

Finally, it was the morning of their escape from the Dursleys, it was July 10th and Harry had to wonder once again how his summer breaks seemed to grow shorter each year.

After finishing the remaining bread and lunch meat Harry walked to the bathroom, which was empty because the Dursleys had left ridiculously early in an attempt to avoid the freakish business that was certain to take place for the day. Any strange people seen could always be blamed on burglars, door to door salesman, or even Jehovah's witnesses.

After a nice long and hot shower Harry dressed quickly, his trunk packed and prepared to be shrunk by the escort that was to arrive at 11 am. Harry walked into the kitchen to see if his relatives had left him some sort of a note, and had to visibly restrain himself from laughing at the sight of the modified padlock on the refrigerator. By appearances, Petunia had gotten wise to the midnight snack habits of Vernon and Dudley.

With both Harry and Sirius sitting in the den, a knock on the front door at exactly 11 had the pair grabbing all of their stuff and shuffling to the front door. Pulling the door open revealed an average sized man, carrying a briefcase of some sort. Harry almost wanted to scream in frustration, of all the times for a traveling salesman to knock on the door.

His mental struggle was halted when the man said in a high pitched voice, "Wotcher Mr. Potter and mutt, we come bearing your get out of jail free cards."

Harry managed a quick grin as Padfoot growled with indignation. Remembering the protocol described in a letter from Dumbledore he asked the agreed upon password question, "Who do you represent?"

The man quickly replied, "The order of the magical turkey."

Harry chuckled and nodded, "Just don't let Fawkes catch you calling him that."

The man merely smiled as he pulled out a wand and shrunk Harry's trunk with a casual wave of his wand before he stood aside to reveal a black car of decent size. The man said, "We have a safe FLOO connection we'll be driving the two of you to. Mad-Eye wanted to fly all of the way to headquarters on brooms, but fortunately more sane minds carried the day."

After pocketing Harry's trunk in a pocket the man escorted the pair to the car before opening the door and said, "We have a patrol of people riding brooms under invisibility cloaks. So just relax and we should be to the safe house in about a half of an hour."

Harry settled into the back seat of the spacious car, and Padfoot curled up in the seat next to him as Harry noticed the driver of the car was a tall man of color, with a shaved head and stud earring in one ear. Harry leaned forward and introduced himself, "I'm Harry Potter, pleased to meet you."

The man grinned into the mirror and replied in a booming baritone voice, "Kingsley Shacklebolt at your service. That gentleman you were talking to was Tonks; we're both aurors with the ministry and order members to boot."

Harry's face became horrified. "That's Remus' girlfriend?"

Kingsley laughed as Tonks, still in man form in the passengers seat bristled, "Well Tonks is a very talented metamorphagus."

Harry frowned, "I thought that a metamorphagus could only change small things though."

Tonks decided to jump in, "There haven't been many full metamorphagi for a few centuries. Those partial metamorphs can only change things like hair and eye color. A full metamorph can alter anything but body size."

Harry nodded and then grinned, "Well you have a nice beard Tonks. I'll be sure to tell Remus as much when we get to headquarters."

Tonks scrunched up her face as her hair became spiky and a bubblegum pink color, her face shifting into a feminine one, complete with cute button nose. She turned around and smirked, "So, I'm guessing word of my verbal harassment of your Hermione has made its way back to you?"

Harry merely smirked in response, making it very clear that the teasing had just started, at least for his part in the little war. Tonks brayed a laugh before turning her attention back to the road ahead, making her own mental plans to escalate the teasing into a full blown prank war for the rest of the summer.

Padfoot sat on his seat, with his ears perked as he began planning his own series of pranks on both couples, after all he couldn't be seen to show any favoritism. A small but persistent part of Harry simply screamed at him. All of this teasing and banter was distracting him from his main purpose now that the prophecy's contents had been divulged. But for today at least, the voice had been once again quashed down in blissful denial, maybe tomorrow it would rear its ugly head and try to take charge of his life once again.

Harry's silence wasn't remarked upon by those in the car, although Sirius certainly knew the pensive look on his godson's face and the ill tidings it meant. Harry hadn't disclosed what news Dumbledore had told him to put him in such a mood as of yet, but even if he had to hex it out of Dumbledore himself Sirius would know before Harry's birthday in three weeks.

Finally, they pulled into the drive of a modest house in a neighborhood Harry had no idea of its location. Tonks subtly flicked

her wand as they approached the house, the faint click of something unlocking her only sign of success. Kingsley and Tonks ushered the pair into the house where Sirius finally transformed back into his human form, feeling a little sore but overall no worse for the wear.

Working his jaw he said, "Well not that I mind being in my form for that long, but it's a bugger talking again after being quiet for a week."

Tonks smiled sweetly at Sirius, "Don't strain yourself on our account."

Harry grinned as Kingsley watched on like a disapproving parent, before he finally said, "For crying out loud Tonks, give them the special FLOO powder so we can get on with this."

Tonks stuck her tongue out at Kingsley before she reached into a pocket and pulled out four small pouches. Sirius reached for one only to have his hand slapped before she explained, "Harry, this is single destination FLOO powder. It's been charmed to take you to only one place so when you drop it at your feet you don't need to call a destination out. Think of it as speed dial for FLOO for lack of a better muggle comparison."

Harry nodded as he took the offered pouch wordlessly and waited for someone else to go first, just in case something happened to the first one through.

Sirius grinned roguishly as he stepped over to the fireplace. He smirked at Tonks before he blew her a raspberry and tossed his pouch down at his feet, a brilliant flash of emerald fire followed as he was whisked to headquarters to start the summer in earnest.

Harry sighed heavily as he was next to stop into the FLOO grate, he was slightly bolstered by the fact that as a cat animagus FLOO travel should be easier as he tossed his own pouch down at his feet. A flash of emerald flames enveloped him as the uncomfortable sensation of FLOO travel assaulted his senses.

The next thing he knew he was staggering out of a fireplace and a face full of brown hair filled his eyes. As he breathed in Hermione's comforting scent he closed his eyes, feeling more at home than he ever had before.

Chapter 2

Amelia Bones looked around the packed courtroom with a discerning eye as she polished her monocle with something akin to glee. In a few moments Peter Pettigrew would be escorted into courtroom 10 to have his trial, and with little doubt the kiss would be administered after the usual debates.

Harry Potter was at the moment worth more than his weight in galleons several times over. Typically the media would turn against the heroes of the wizarding world to turn a knut when the chance provided itself. However, aside from a short period during the boy's second year where he was reported as the Heir of Slytherin, Potter had avoided that pitfall of celebrity in the wizarding world.

Shaking her head as other impressions of Potter from her niece pervaded her mind; she quickly went over the various evidence files in front of her as the aurors finally brought in the star of the trial, Peter Pettigrew. With a confession on record, the sniveling man had no chance of avoiding his fate. However, due to some clever political wrangling Fudge managed to pressure Bones into only forwarding testimony pertinent to the trial. Unfortunately, this meant that news of Voldemort's return would remain a closely guarded secret.

Due to reasons that were obvious to some but not to the general public, Dumbledore would be sitting this trial out due to a conflict of interest. Therefore, as head of the DMLE Amelia had the pleasure of sitting in the head magistrate's chair for the trial and she would not accept a plea bargain like she had been so disgusted to see so often at the last round of Death Eater trials.

As Pettigrew was seated the aurors guarding the exits closed the doors, and Percy Weasley due to a transfer to the DMLE stood in his new position of court scribe. "Hear ye hear ye, all rise in respect of the honorable Madam Amelia Bones who resides over these proceedings."

The crowd and players all stood, before Amelia finally nodded and they all took their seats as she softly intoned, "We are here today to

hear the case against one Peter Pettigrew. Scribe, what charges does the Plaintiff bring?"

Percy unfurled a scroll and read, "Charges include accessory to the murder of James and Lily Potter, assault against one Sirius Black, the murder of one dozen muggles in clear challenge to the statutes of secrecy, and willingly serving the dark wizard He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

Pettigrew was pale and pasty even by British standards. Of course by the end of the long laundry list of charges the balding rat faced man had paled further as he shrunk in his seat without the aid of his animagus form.

Amelia nodded before she turned to the defense attorney, organized by the ministry and said, "You may make your opening statement Mr. Limnum."

The short but slim wizard stood and addressed the court, "I believe that Peter Pettigrew was a man who made some bad decisions and he agrees with me. Mr. Pettigrew only wishes to ask the people of this court to think of what they would do in his circumstance. He was given a choice by the dark wizard to either join him and divulge the location of the Potters, or die by his hand. Peter Pettigrew acted out of self preservation, and while it may seem distasteful I ask if any of you would have had the strength to act otherwise in his position."

While Amelia found the statement to be rather bland several in the audience were nodding thoughtfully, some of their expressions even showing sympathy for Pettigrew. Bones knew that in terms of the law Pettigrew's punishment would be the same, but if this wasn't nipped in the bud it could open a whole new can of worms in any future Death Eater trials. After all, considering how badly the first series of those trials went, anything was possible this time around.

Sensing the defense solicitor was finished she turned to the prosecution and said, "Prosecution, your opening statement as well please."

Dedalus Diggle was a member of a secret militia that few knew of as well as the Ministry's top attorney in terms of criminal proceedings.

He had been instructed to handle this trial with care so as not to expose sensitive information to the public. "Ladies and Gentlemen of the court, this case is a very simple one as Mr. Pettigrew has already confessed to all of the crimes that were listed earlier. In a way this is merely a trial to determine the man's final punishment. Now, what we need to ask ourselves is what line we want to draw as a society. Do we wish to condemn murderers and rapists to death without reprieve, or do we wish to let them rot away in a hellish place like Azkaban prison?"

I needn't point out that Azkaban prison hasn't proven to be quite the fortress it was once thought to be. Both Barty Crouch Jr. and the recently exonerated Sirius Black managed to escape the confines of the island. Do we really think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would be confined to such a prison for any amount of time? Do we base our society on tolerance of murderers or on justice for murderers? That is the question that Madam Bones and the rest of the esteemed members of the Wizengamot must decide."

Bones really didn't care for many litigators, especially with her earlier career as an auror that had seen far too many evil witches and wizards freed on claims of the *Imperius* curse or other such nonsense. But, in this case she agreed implicitly with Diggle's statements. Pettigrew's life as a free man was rapidly coming to a close, now the question was: would all aspects of his life cease or would he live on as an escape threat at Azkaban?

After a few witnesses were called both to confirm all of the gathered evidence and explain its reliability both parties were in agreement that no witnesses would be necessary to shed more light on Pettigrew's crimes.

Amelia led the group into the large deliberation hall adjoining the courtroom. There hadn't been such a room at the last Death Eater trials, and Amelia thought it would be beneficial to create some distance from the people they would have to condemn from time to time. While she was the magistrate for the case, she remembered that Dumbledore still carried weight with his vote as a general Wizengamot member at least for this case.

Dumbledore apparently expected as much; after all he was a very old wizard and also very hard to fool for any length of time. He smiled genially, "Hello Amelia, what are your thoughts on the punishment?"

Amelia's smile faltered as Dumbledore had maneuvered her into the tenuous position of being the first to show their hand as she replied, "I think that this isn't a simple decision and should be treated as such. But, a few points need to be made. First, rough estimates placed Voldemort's forces at maybe 100 strong during the first war. Those 100 terrorized most of the 15,000 witches and wizards living in the isles for close to ten years before the Potters made their sacrifice. What would be better, to have the populace live in terror of the few, or send a message to the few that we won't accept that any more?"

Dumbledore's ever present twinkle dimmed some at Amelia's words. She raised some very persuasive points; points that he hadn't allowed himself to ponder since the end of his own personal war with Grindelwald. That had been a very dark time in his life and he found that repressing the worst of the memories allowed him to wake up every morning with a lighter outlook on life. Maybe it was time to take a good look in the mirror so that he could help prevent the same mistake with Harry that he himself had made fifty years earlier.

Finally he gravely replied, "While I loathe the necessity of such an action, I can not deny that there is indeed that necessity any longer. Do you wish for the kiss or the veil for Peter?"

Amelia was startled that she had managed to get through to the normally placid and non-violent headmaster of Hogwarts. She was also startled that he had even thought to use the veil as a potential option for captured Death Eaters. The veil hadn't been used in over two centuries as a tool for prisoners, but in a way it offered the best possible solution. Only a select few knew the secret of the veil, and they were all in the Department of Mysteries guarding its secrets. Needless to say, it was a one way trip and was as merciful as any execution could be.

Finally finding her voice she replied, "The veil definitely has some possibilities. I'll take a look at Ministry by-laws when we get back into

the courtroom. I have all of the provisions on record just in case. I'll have Weasley bring them in."

Dumbledore nodded before he disappeared into the crowd, apparently to advocate the veil suggestion to some of his more influential colleagues.

Nearly an hour later a consensus on the veil had been made, and it was an unsettled group that returned to the courtroom. Murderer or not, none of the members ever wanted to condemn another human being to death without a fight before hand. In this case, their hands had been forced by the notoriety and amount of Pettigrew's crimes.

Amelia stood and even before she began to speak Pettigrew had the look of a condemned man walking on the green mile. She softly but respectfully said, "It is the decision of this court and its members, that by a vote of 38-12 Peter Pettigrew will be sentenced to execution by the death veil."

Most of those in attendance gasped as the punishment was announced. In fact, the only one that appeared relieved by the announcement was Pettigrew as he at least could avoid the dementor's kiss. In a way it was liberating for the man that had lived as vermin for a large portion of his life. He would pay for his crimes and only hope that his sins could be forgiven before the end of eternity. For once the man that was the picture of cowardice would face this final adversity with his head held high. He owed that much to Lily and James at the very least.

Harry felt wonderful in Hermione's embrace for the first time in a week as he murmured into her ear, "I missed you."

Hermione smiled into his chest as she carefully steered him away from the fireplace to prevent a pile up from Tonks and Kingsley who were coming next. Pulling away enough to see his face she quietly replied, "I have so much to fill you in on. Do you have your stuff?"

Harry was about to reply when Tonks tumbled into the fireplace and stepped out of it gracefully before tripping none too gracefully on her own feet. Harry and Hermione covered their snickers with a pair of

well timed coughs that Harry explained away with, "FLOO powder is terrible on the allergies isn't it?"

Kingsley came a moment later and simply helped his fellow auror to her feet before he pointedly looked at Harry and Hermione and said, "You two need to get upstairs for the next couple of hours. Tonks give him his trunk; Albus told me that his owl is already here."

Harry looked at Hermione quizzically as the pair that had been affable a few moments earlier was talking as if the teens weren't in the room. No answer was forthcoming however, as Molly bustled in and gave Harry a quick hug before ushering him along with Hermione up the stairs.

Reaching the second floor Hermione led him as they each had a handle of his trunk to the left end of the hallway before she said, "You have your own room here Harry. Ron is sharing with the twins by some sad stroke of luck. I'm sharing with Ginny down the hall, so expect most of us to visit in your room tonight. It's the biggest on the floor after all."

Harry stared at her blankly, trying to wrap his mind around having a large room as she opened the door and lead him into a room which was three times the size of his room at the Dursleys. It was sparsely decorated, as though awaiting its owner's personal touch, with a small bookcase next to a large four post bed. The walls were painted a nice gray, and Harry still hadn't managed to verbalize his shock at someone thinking him deserving of something so nice.

After getting Harry to release his grip on the handle of his trunk she frowned in concern, "Are you ok?"

Harry finally blinked and asked in a shaky voice, "Are you sure this is mine?"

Hermione looked at him quizzically for a moment before she understood. Keeping her surprise and other swell of emotions from reaching her face she reached over and took his hand before she said, "You deserve it Harry."

Harry's lip quivered for such a brief moment she wasn't sure she had seen it, but then again she didn't know that long ago he had vowed never to cry over the Dursleys again. After a moment he composed himself and began to unpack a few parts of his trunk. Harry quickly resized Hedwig's cage and hooked it on a long nail hanging from the wall well aware that a house under the *Fidelius* and any magic done inside of it couldn't be detected.

After looking around the room in satisfaction he turned to Hermione, and noticing her watching him intently he sighed. "What?"

Hermione smiled slightly, "I was just making sure you're alright."

Harry ran a hand through his hair before he replied, "Yeah, stuff just sneaks up on me sometimes." Changing subjects swiftly he said, "You said you had something to tell me?"

Hermione nodded slowly and carefully said, "Yes, but I think we should discuss it with Ron and Ginny. They might be able to add something that I don't know about yet."

Harry looked blankly at her, he knew he was missing something obvious and probably something he had some kind of knowledge about and yet it eluded him. Of course, he would be the first to admit he hadn't been on his game since Dumbledore had told him the prophecy, but that was a concern for another day.

With a start he suddenly realized that Hermione had grasped his hand and gently led him down the hall to the girls' room. The door was already open and Harry couldn't help but grin as he watched Ron and Ginny play chess atop the pink frilly bed.

They both noticed the movement and smiled upon seeing their friend as Ron said, "Hey mate, good to see you."

Harry nodded as Hermione led him over to the opposite bed before she flicked her wand, closing the door with a strange squelching sound and then putting a simple privacy charm up. Harry grinned and added some more stringent charms before Hermione elbowed him in the gut and said. "Show off."

Harry shrugged before he asked, "Ok so what's this I need to know?"

The Weasley siblings and Hermione shared some glances before Ron spoke, "This is the headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix mate."

Harry appeared nonplussed and said, "And?"

Hermione arched her eyebrow and asked in a surprised tone, "This isn't a surprise to you?"

Harry shrugged, "I've gotten a few mentions of 'the order' today around Tonks, and Remus mentioned something vague about a group my parents were in during Voldemort's first reign in some of his letters. I assume this is that group."

Hermione rolled her eyes at the flinch by both Ginny and Ron at the name, especially Ron, before she continued, "Well, I wouldn't know about that, but the biggest problem is that the adults don't seem to think we have any business knowing what is going on."

Harry's expression did darken at this, "Oh?"

Hermione nodded, "Apparently we have no idea of the evils of war like they do."

Harry grinned wryly, "Ah yes, I'm certain they've all faced Voldemort and lived to tell the tale."

Hermione nodded vigorously, "Exactly Harry, we're at the center of this and they're treating us like children."

Harry sighed, "I'll talk to Sirius about keeping us informed."

Hermione nodded before she asked, "Ready for the Occlumency training tomorrow?"

Ron and Ginny apparently realized that they were no longer needed and returned to their chess match as Harry shrugged, "Hopefully we can get right into Legilimency. We've both put a lot of hard work into

Occlumency over the past year, and I think we've done a good job at it too."

Hermione smiled before her eyes lit up, "I got a letter from Fleur about S.P.H.E.R.E. Apparently she has started a chapter at Beauxbatons and they elected an executive board already."

Harry smiled warmly and said, "See, you're making the world a better place."

Hermione shook her head as she took his hand, "No we're making the world a better place. But, that isn't even the biggest news."

Harry's smile reached his eyes for the first time since before the third task as he couldn't help but grin at the mischievous look in her eyes. Leaning over to tickle her sides he said, "Are you going to tell me or do I have to snog it out of you."

From the other side of the room Ron groaned, "Oh for Merlin's sake, Gin grab the board we need to go down to the den if those two are going to be at it again."

Hermione giggled as she replied, "We are not going to snog...yet anyways. Although Harry does make an inviting case, I'll save you the indignity Ronald."

Ron looked at Hermione in exasperation as he shook his head. Harry was certain he heard his friend mumble something along the lines of, "Bloody indignity, how about using words people actually use for once."

Ginny merely grinned as she placed her brother in check, "Uh oh Ronniekins, someone seems to be distracted."

The tips of Ron's ear were red before he grunted and focused his eyes intently on the board, seeking a way out from the mess his inattention had caused him.

Harry and Hermione watched this all in amusement before finally she turned to him and asked, "What do you say to coming with my parents and me on vacation in August?"

Harry tilted his head in puzzlement, "You and your parents are still going on vacation?"

Hermione apparently wasn't expecting that response and she replied with a hint of worry in her voice, "Um yeah, there's a dental conference in Japan and my mum and dad are going. They planned on flying me in at the end of the week and having a family vacation for another week."

Harry nodded, "So you want me to go then?"

Hermione smiled, "Yes, and I've already talked to Professor Dumbledore about it. He agreed because he said he had some friends in the Japanese Ministry of Magic that could keep an eye on us and spare a security contingent for a week."

Harry pondered this for a moment, "Um, if it's ok with your parents I'd like that. But, don't I need to get a passport?"

Hermione squealed and gave him a tight hug as she sat with her legs folded under her. Finally she pulled away and replied to his question, "Of course you need a passport, but I'm sure the Gringotts goblins can get you a magical one of some sort."

Harry nodded pensively as his brain finally started firing and planning ahead in spite of his knowledge of the prophecy. Nodding to himself he said, "Sirius told me there was a nice library in here. Want to join me for a look?"

Hermione's eyes lit up, "Oh, it must be under some kind of a *Fidelius* charm. Who's the secret keeper?"

Harry smiled at her patiently, "Sirius is, but like I said he told me all about it. He told me that there were a few books that have some dark magic in them, but that all of the cursed and jinxed books have been removed."

Hermione slapped her forehead with the palm of her hand as she grinned sheepishly, "Yes I guess he couldn't have told you about it if he wasn't the secret keeper, could he?"

Harry merely grinned at her cheekily as he stood from the bed offering his hand, which Hermione accepted gratefully. As they left the room they heard some raised voices down in the meeting room. Hermione sighed wearily and muttered, "They've been like that almost every time they have a meeting. I'm sure having Sirius back didn't improve Professor Snape's mood any either."

Almost on cue the sound of glass breaking could be heard before the doors to the meeting room were blasted open. Surprisingly it was Remus who was the culprit as he bellowed, "Don't you understand? These children are the ones who have been fighting the war for the past four years. Yet you belittle their accomplishments simply because they are younger. Harry has faced down Voldemort, Dementors, Death Eaters, and a Basilisk and still survived to tell the tale. Not even Albus can boast that, and yet you belittle him and his friends who have been with him every step of the way. I can't even begin to describe how much rage I am feeling at the moment."

Tonks, Sirius, and surprisingly enough Snape tried to calm the enraged werewolf while Hermione whispered, "There's a full moon tomorrow night; I'm sure that has something to do with it."

Harry frowned but nodded; he had a feeling he would be given more insight into what had caused the explosion later. Reaching the third floor Harry led Hermione down the right hallway as she asked, "The library is down here?"

Harry grinned, "Yes, but that isn't what I wanted to show you. Sirius told me of another guest that's staying here."

Hermione arched her eyebrow in question before she shrugged, "As long as it isn't Malfoy."

Harry laughed softly as he reached the room at the far end of this wing of the house before opening it slowly to reveal Buckbeak, looking very much worse for the wear in chains and crouched in the corner of the room. Placing his hand on top of Hermione's Harry whispered, "Let me wake him up and then you can come over and pet him with me. After that we need to find a way to get him out of here safely."

Harry slowly approached the large animal and with a bow he said, "Buckbeak, wake up please."

The Hippogriff slowly opened its eyes and when it recognized Harry's sign of respect decided to rouse from its spot and return the gesture. Harry waved for Hermione behind his back and she repeated his pose carefully. The hippogriff looked at the pair in puzzlement for a moment before some sign of recognition filled its eyes.

With Harry on one side and Hermione on the other they gently stroked the feathers on Buckbeak's neck for what seemed hours. They were broken from their activity when the door to the room swung open revealing Sirius, who still looked rather peeved from the argument a while earlier.

Spotting the pair he seemed to deflate some before he said, "Hey you two. Taking my usual hiding spot I see."

Harry frowned, "Sirius, what exactly is going on?"

Sirius opened his mouth and no sound escaped before he snapped it shut, apparently in thought about what he could safely say. Finally he responded, "Well, Molly seems rather intent on keeping all of you kids in the house blissfully ignorant of some unpleasant realities. Unfortunately, at the moment I am forced to agree. Moony isn't all too happy with me at the moment to say the least. But, with your Occlumency and Legilimency training, OWL studies, and anything else you might want to do I think it would be too much to handle at the moment."

Harry sighed; he supposed that at least Sirius was being upfront with him about why they couldn't be more involved. Finally he settled on, "Can you at least tell us when something comes up directly related to us or school?"

Sirius looked pensive for a long moment, "Yeah, I suppose that would be alright."

Harry glanced over to Hermione who merely nodded, their nonverbal communication skills coming in handy as he turned back to Sirius, "We'll let you have your hiding spot. Is the kitchen clear?"

Sirius nodded absently as he watched the pair leave the room, before he walked over and settled into the corner of the room. Molly Weasley's words of an hour earlier still were echoing in his mind.

Flashback

"Molly, you can't seriously think that ignorance is the best option in dealing with Harry, Hermione, and your kids can you?"

Molly sniffed in a condescending manner, "If you knew the first thing about parenting you never would have run off after Pettigrew that night. I assure you I've forgotten more about parenting than you'll ever learn."

Sirius stiffened, the Order meeting hadn't even officially begun yet, and he was already being called out for a mistake he had made fourteen years ago. He didn't notice the violent red color that Remus' face had blossomed into.

Fortunately, Arthur stepped in and softly said, "Molly dear, you've already put your foot in your mouth with Harry and Hermione this past year. Perhaps you should think about keeping your thoughts to yourself if you haven't anything nice to say."

Molly huffed but Arthur's words had the desired effect, at least for a few minutes as Dumbledore called the meeting into session.

After listening to a brief report by Snape on Voldemort's movements, Remus stood up and that's when the proverbial crap hit the fan. "I am well aware that there are rules preventing any witch or wizard not of age from joining the Order. But, given the circumstances I think Harry and the others in the house deserve to know of at least some of the happenings of Voldemort's followers."

Sirius couldn't stop the small grin forming on his face as Moony echoed his earlier sentiments, albeit with a touch more tact. Dumbledore appeared to be taking this matter into some serious thought before Molly finally blew up. "Absolutely not, I refuse to advocate robbing any more children of their youth and innocence. You, you and Black don't have a fit bone in your bodies to have a child. One of you is an irresponsible prankster, and the other is

classified as a dark creature. I've been more of a mother to all of those children than either of you has, so I think my word should carry some more weight."

Remus' eyes narrowed as he felt an enhanced feeling of rage due to the proximity to the full moon. Just as he was about to explode Dumbledore stepped in. "Molly, you may very well have a point. But, Sirius is Harry's guardian and anything Harry knows the others will as well. Instead of attacking a man wrongfully imprisoned, perhaps you should hold your tongue."

Sirius glanced around at the assembled members and was surprised to see that nearly half of the members were in some sort of agreement with the Weasley matriarch. Shaking his head he grabbed Remus before the man did something he'd regret and said, "This is my house and you are all here because I volunteered it for the cause. But, if Molly can't at the very least show a little thanks and gratitude for housing her family this summer then perhaps she should find other accommodations. I will take any tactfully prepared argument into consideration on this matter, but know this. I will not be belittled by a woman that has successfully scared every single one of her adult children out of the country or worse out of the family like Percy. With all due respect to Albus, the meeting for today has come to an end. Anyone who would care to discuss this matter in depth respectfully may follow me to an adjoining room. If not, good day to you."

Molly began spewing some particularly vicious things at this point, and even at Arthur's behest to cease she continued until Remus joined in and made it a screaming match before their small group exited the room.

End Flashback

While he didn't hold Molly's esteem in high regards by any means at the moment, he did have to admit that at least a few of her statements matched his own feelings on the matter. Granted, he had never been what you would call a rational and level-headed person. But, his actions of that night had been both irrational and irresponsible. The worst part was the imagined disappointment

James and Lily would have in him for failing to uphold his role as godfather.

Glancing over at Buckbeak he felt a deep kinship with the hippogriff. He too knew what it felt like to be cooped up in a hellhole with no obvious end in sight. Flicking his wand he banished the chains holding the beast in place before he said, "I'll be working on a way to get you out of here Beaky. Now I just need to figure out what the hell I'm doing with my own life."

Meanwhile, with some gentle prodding Harry convinced Hermione to join him in the library to transform into their animagus forms for the first time in a couple of weeks. The library was quite large, and while not quite half of the size of Hogwarts library, it held books on much more advanced topics that guaranteed that the summer would not only consist of Potions review and Occlumency training.

Harry's black jaguar form was stalking Hermione's jaguar form as they crept between rows of bookcases in a strange game of cat and mouse. The entire thing was much more of a game than anything else, because with their enhanced feline senses it was nigh impossible to sneak up on each other.

As they both came into view near the center of the room Harry playfully pounced and tackled Hermione to the ground as she playfully batted at his ears with her paws with thankfully retracted claws. After a time they both grew bored with this and Harry began to nuzzle Hermione's chest when they both heard the door open to reveal Remus. He looked at the pair in startled surprise before his eyes dawned in comprehension. "Harry? Hermione?"

With nearly no effort they quickly transformed back into their human forms, still sprawled on the ground, although with Harry between Hermione's spread legs. Both blushed furiously as Hermione silently thanked her stars that she had at least had the foresight to wear her jeans for the day.

Harry smiled sheepishly, "Well, I guess our secret is out of the bag."

Hermione rolled her eyes as she pushed Harry over and rose to her feet, mentally taking note that she rather enjoyed the feel of Harry on

top of her. Remus blinked once more before he said, "When did you two manage this little feat of magic?"

Hermione quickly replied, "We followed proper ministry protocol and I managed to transform in a little over three months. Harry's form took around five months, but he has some additional abilities."

Remus turned thoughtful before he exclaimed, "Harry's a twilight Panther!"

Harry winced. "Yeah, but I don't think they heard you downstairs."

Remus shook his head. "The library is magically soundproofed here so that you can read in peace." His eyes took on a mischievous twinkle as he asked, "So, who do you plan on pranking first?"

Harry and Hermione shared a brief grin, before Hermione replied, "Why ruin the surprise?"

Remus chuckled briefly before he said, "First day here Harry, and you've already amazed me."

Harry blushed as Remus continued his teasing, "I mean I expect such disrespectful behavior from Hermione but you?" Remus tutted as Hermione blustered good naturedly.

With a soft pop Dobby entered the library, "Master Harry, Missus Hermy, and Master Wolfie, Dobby is telling you it is time for dinner."

Harry laughed, "Wolfie?"

Remus let out a long suffering sigh, "I swear Tonks is worse than Sirius sometimes."

Dobby disappeared with a pop before Remus' expression darkened and he added, "It might not be pretty tonight at dinner. Molly is on the outs with Sirius and me, so don't make it any worse please."

Harry and Hermione shared a look; now they both had context for the earlier shouting match. The summer suddenly looked as though it might be a little less enjoyable.

A/N: Alright, so anyone have any guesses as to how they might reveal their animagus forms to Sirius? Next, chapter we have a brief discussion with Snape and the first Occlumency session with Will. Ron and Ginny will get a fair amount of chapter space as I reveal some of their inner workings as well. Now, the question of the chapter as was requested by several reviewers.

For those of you that have read the various theories and essays on HBP, what aspects do you think are most likely to come to fruition in Deathly Hallows?

Examples of essays include HHr leaning essays, “Seeing the Forest” by *Sherbert Lemon*...and others by *Brown* to name a few. Textual inferences only and I'll gladly share my own thoughts on them.

Thanks for reading and thanks to everyone who takes the time to review.

Chapter 3

Harry rolled out of bed bright and early, his body still firmly engaged in his sleeping habits from the year at Hogwarts. After a quick shower he ran downstairs to catch some breakfast before Ron, Ginny, and the twins would break up the quiet. He loved his surrogate siblings dearly, but on the whole he thought they might be a tad bit bombastic compared to what he was accustomed to. Hagrid's condition made more sense considering he was the size of two men and therefore should make as much noise as he did.

As he took the stairs two at a time, Harry could hear the disquiet of someone arguing in the kitchen or dining room area connected to it. Harry could easily guess what two adults were the source of contention and decided to intercede before things deteriorated any further.

Pushing the door open Harry was startled to see Molly and Arthur alone in the kitchen, both of their faces flushed from their apparent argument. Of course the noise of Harry's entrance was enough to catch their attention and they looked rather embarrassed before Harry uncomfortably said, "Um good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley."

Arthur managed a small laugh, "Right then, well sorry about waking you up Harry. Molly and I are having a bit of a disagreement."

Molly nodded, "Yes we were dear, but you needn't worry yourself about us."

Harry discomfort only increased as he shuffled his feet, "Thanks but erm, I actually do have something I think I need to say."

Molly and Arthur shared a brief look before they were interrupted as Dobby popped into the room with a carton of eggs in hand.

The small elf squeaked, "Master Harry Potter sir, Dobby is making breakfast, is there anything you be wanting?"

Harry shrugged, "Not really, but thanks for asking Dobby."

Dobby merely nodded as the three exited the kitchen to allow the exuberant house elf to finish his preparations for breakfast. Harry had no doubt that normally Dobby would have been accompanied by Winky, but Hermione had wanted Winky's added presence for her parents in case all of the other safeguards failed.

Taking three seats around the large table in the dining room Harry finally spoke, "I kind of overheard the argument at the end of the Order meeting and I talked with Sirius afterwards. Do you really think that Sirius and Remus are unfit to be my guardians Mrs. Weasley?"

Molly frowned as her resolve faltered, only slightly, right in front of Harry before she said, "Yes, I do."

Harry had expected as much and he asked, "So are you telling me that when you and Mr. Weasley had Bill you never had obstacles to overcome or even that you never made mistakes?"

Molly smiled indulgently, as one would smile to appease a child. "Everyone makes mistakes when raising children dear."

Harry nodded, as he pondered the best way to phrase his next question. However, he was interrupted by Arthur who said, "Harry, Molly loves you like a son, as do I. I've also tried to explain that no matter how much we wish it, we'll never have the kind of connection that you have with Sirius and Remus."

Harry gave Mr. Weasley a thoughtful look. Honestly, he had never seen the man stand up to Molly or her whims in the past and he suddenly understood the quiet strength of the man.

With an appreciative nod and a smile Harry replied, "I'll always appreciate the kindness you and your family have given me. But, this is my first chance at having a family, or at least the best approximation of a family where I know that I'm not just an add-on to a family that already exists. Despite your efforts to the contrary, I have always felt like an intruder in your house. I don't feel like that here; instead I feel like I actually belong."

Taking a deep breath he continued. "I would really appreciate if you could bury the hatchet with Sirius and Remus and we can move

forward as friends and family of a sort. I mean the only real enemy is Voldemort, so why should we waste energy on anything but our best efforts to stop him?"

Molly weakly protested, "Harry, you don't need to fight in this war, leave it to the adults."

Harry laughed mirthlessly, "Maybe if you had said that five years ago it might have actually made a difference. But now that I've faced Voldemort in some form three times and a basilisk in my spare time, I'd have to say that this war is as much if not more mine than anyone else's. Other people have lost their families to the bastard, but I'm the only one he keeps coming after. I guess that means it's either me or him, doesn't it?"

Arthur and Molly looked rather uncomfortable with Harry's declaration before Molly said, "But you deserve to have a childhood dear."

Harry ran a hand through his still-wet hair before he replied, "I'll still play Quidditch and spend time with my friends. I reckon that's more normal I've ever expected in terms of being a kid. I don't feel like I'm missing anything, because my life now is better than it ever was growing up with the Dursleys."

Molly and Arthur shared another uncomfortable glance before Harry waved his hand. "Listen, what's done is done. But, if you want to help me then please lay off of Sirius and Remus and maybe even show you support them in front of others."

With a pair of nods from the adults Harry sighed in relief and they settled into a comfortable silence. The only sound that could be heard was Dobby putting together a large breakfast for the inhabitants of the house. Finally, Hermione came lightly down the stairs, a small book in hand with plans to read during breakfast. Dobby quickly brought some tea and juice out to the table as he bustled back into the kitchen whistling from the sounds of things a very happy elfin song.

Hermione smiled brightly at the assembled group as closer inspection revealed her reading an Occlumency text their tutor had recommended. She sat down next to Harry, who poured her a cup of

tea with two sugars, just as she liked it. Finally she said, "Good morning everyone. Lovely morning isn't it?"

Harry chuckled quietly as the others looked at him questioningly. He smiled and said, "Well, considering there is no way to tell if the sun is even out yet, Hermione can only be happy about one thing."

Arthur had finally caught on and playfully asked, "Oh, what is that?"

Harry grinned at Hermione. "We have a tutor coming in to test us in something. Hermione almost always gets excited like this before an exam."

Hermione smacked him on the arm lightly as she fondly said, "Prat."

Molly watched the pair with an unreadable expression on her face. To be completely honest, her Howler for Hermione the previous year had only been partially motivated by her concern for Harry. In fact, nearly as much of it had been due to her own desire to see Ginny get her storybook hero and ride off into the sunset. She wasn't blind though, and any woman could see the difference between how they acted now compared to when they arrived before the Quidditch World Cup the previous summer.

Despite her issues with the young witch the previous year she had also harbored some hope that Hermione would be the one to finally get Ron's head to join his heart and help him become the man she knew he could be. She knew from Ron's comments during the summers that they argued more than they agreed, and while that wasn't exactly the best route to a relationship Molly thought she also detected some admiration in her son's voice as well.

Of course she had also surmised that Harry had been the glue that even kept Ron and Hermione friends in the first place. Now seeing Harry and Hermione like this in the early morning she understood the ease the pair had with each other. That same ease never would have existed with her youngest children and the objects of their desires and in a way it took the sting from the disappointment of what they wanted compared to what they would get.

Molly was broken from her mental ruminations as Dobby brought four plates of eggs, hash browns, and toast for breakfast. As Hermione spread some marmalade on her toast, Sirius and the twins came down the stairs, their presence announced by the boisterous laughs of the three as they discussed something that would be bad news for someone eventually.

As they entered the dining room their smiles slipped from their faces as they spotted Arthur and Molly sitting across the table from Harry and Hermione. Harry glanced up and gave Sirius a reassuring smile, which seemed to do the trick as the tension melted from the last male Black in a matter of seconds. The three sat down along 'family' lines, Sirius with Harry and Hermione and the twins with their parents. Dobby appeared with three more plates a moment later, still humming that same tune as he happily walked back into the kitchen; Hermione's views on elf slavery gradually shifting the entire time.

After everyone had settled in Sirius swallowed a bite of his eggs and asked, "Are you two ready for that tutor Moony organized for you?"

Hermione simply gushed her reply. "Oh I'm so excited to have a private tutor for such a difficult branch of magic."

The twins sniggered at Hermione's answer as Harry merely grinned at her obvious excitement over learning something new. Sirius merely nodded before he asked, "What about you Harry?"

Harry shrugged, "It should be interesting, but I'll leave all of the excitement to Hermione." He finished his statement and gave Mrs. Weasley a significant look.

Molly fidgeted with her napkin for a moment before she sighed, "Sirius, I apologize for my statements yesterday. It wasn't my place to say that, and I'll make a statement to that effect at the next Order meeting."

Sirius arched a skeptical eyebrow before he glanced over at Harry and asked, "How much of this is actually your idea Molly?"

Molly quietly replied, "I've only had Harry's best interests in mind all along Sirius. Harry was able to convince me with Arthur's help that this is the best for him."

Sirius seemed to weight the sincerity in Molly's words before he gave her a small smile. "Apology accepted then. I also apologize on Remus and my behalf for the things we said in response to your statements. I'm sure Remus will apologize when he is able. Having a full moon this close tends to leave him more irritable and grouchy."

Molly accepted Sirius's apology in kind and the rest of breakfast was spent discussing matters both large and small in regards to the wizarding world. Only one topic remained off limits, and to be honest Voldemort never was too far from their thoughts even if the topic didn't lend itself to such thoughts.

Ron rolled out of bed not at all surprised that the room was empty, especially considering his near legendary ability to sleep in. Life wasn't perfect at the moment, but he had almost the entire summer to spend with his best friends and with any luck he might be named prefect and make the Quidditch team to boot.

Walking over to his dresser full of clothes the enchanted mirror on the wall moaned, "Oh dear, time for a shower."

Ron scowled at the mirror, "Thanks for the tip you bloody mirror."

The mirror laughed, "The truth hurts some times ducky."

Begrudgingly Ron grabbed a change of clothes and bustled down to the shower. He could hear laughter down in the kitchen and for a fleeting moment debated sampling some food before his shower. Shaking his head he took some of Hermione's words from the past to heart and for once decided to take some pride in himself and do things the right way.

Even after the events of the year Ron still knew that the friendship he had once shared with his best friends was changed permanently. Now at least he understood and realized that the majority of that was because bonds between people shifted and changed as they grew.

What he had with his friends now was more intense and powerful than what they had shared before.

As he began to rinse the shampoo from his hair Ron ruefully thought, *I was wrong before when I talked to Harry about Hermione in first year. Seeing Harry and Hermione together now they are brilliant but scary even to me.*

He wasn't prepared for something serious like his best friends had, but Ron definitely wanted to play the field a bit this year at Hogwarts and get himself a girlfriend. If his self-imposed exile during the middle of the year had taught him one thing, it was that he was an individual beyond his friendships and instead of expecting things to come to him he needed to go out and do things for himself. He'd never say it aloud, but his mother had made things seem quite to the contrary.

As much as he hated the idea, he was going to need Hermione and his sister's help to become actual boyfriend material. After all, speaking with a mouthful of food and burping for laughs weren't exactly attractants to the fairer sex.

After finishing his shower Ron hurried down the stairs to find his friends and have a bit of a chat to catch up. Hermione had given him a stilted second-hand account of the night after the third task, but he needed to hear that Harry was all right directly from the source.

Reaching the dining room Ron spotted the twins, Ginny, Remus, and Sirius laughing about something, so he asked, "Hey where are Harry and Hermione?"

Remus took a sip from his tea as Dobby scurried into the room to give Ron his breakfast. "They're with a special tutor I arranged for them. They should be able to talk this afternoon, but they might be a little bit cranky."

Ron sighed heavily; once again they were off doing something special and he was going to be left behind. Ginny leaned over and asked, "What is it?" With a firm shake of his head Ron sullenly ate his food, contemplating the general inequities of life.

“Very good work Mr. Potter. You have a mastery over elementary Occlumency. Ms. Granger you too have an excellent grasp over the concept. This will make my job considerably easier as we move forward,” Will Hardison smiled appreciatively.

Hermione flushed, very pleased with the praise and asked, “What other kinds of Occlumency are there aside from elementary? That’s all the book I bought had any mention of.”

Will grinned as he replied, “Well you wouldn’t have heard of the other forms obviously. They are only passed on from one master of the subject to his pupils. You very well might have learned from Mr. Dumbledore, but then again from how Remus describes it there isn’t reason for a lot of trust there at the moment.”

Harry and Hermione didn’t respond to this and Will nodded, “Right then, first I am going to teach you how to modify portions of your elementary defenses of a fortified shield so that an attacking Legilimens will be redirected to a specific memory or false impression.”

Harry and Hermione shared a look; this was definitely going to be interesting.

Ginny was off in the corner of her bed reading the newest issue of *Teen Witch Weekly* when the door swung open and both Harry and Hermione staggered into the room. Both collapsed on Hermione’s bed snuggled together as their exhaustion quickly caught up with them.

Ginny watched the pair for a moment trying to discern if she had some blackmail material on them. But, from the look of their positions, nothing carnal was going on in the least. Ginny frowned as she watched the two and listened as their breathing slowed and they settled into a deep sleep. It was nearly impossible to get blackmail material on Harry and Hermione simply because they acted too much like Bill or Charlie.

Blackmail was such a dirty word Ginny mused; there was nothing wrong with trading information to get something you needed. The problem was that Harry and Hermione were smart enough that they

could put the twins to shame if they really wanted to. They could truly be allies it would pay to have something on to use to her advantage in a pinch.

Ginny knew that her mother had always harbored some hope that she and Harry would get together, but seeing Harry and Hermione tangled together like they were right now, Ginny knew she could never keep up with Harry like Hermione could. While Ginny thought she was quite strong both in terms of will and magic, she knew Hermione was something different altogether and if it wasn't to be her with Harry then Hermione would be just fine too.

Gently she climbed off of her bed and walked to the door but not before pulling a quilt from the closet and placing it on top of the sleeping pair. With a whispered spell the door to the room closed behind her and gave out a loud squelching sound; they deserved to get some sleep without anyone else's interference.

It had been a full week since Harry and Sirius had arrived at Grimmauld Place and the plotting with Remus and Hermione had reached a fever pitch in an attempt to find a truly marauder way to reveal Harry's unique animagus form.

Harry had walked in on one of these planning sessions and with an amused grin simply said, "Tell me when and where I need to be, I'll leave the heavy thinking to you two."

So this is why Hermione and Remus found themselves in the Black family library on Hermione's first day off from Occlumency in six days. Will had been so pleased with the younger witch and wizard's progress that he deemed they had earned a day off and with any luck would be finishing in the next ten days or so.

Remus flipped through his book on magical creatures looking for more than the same small excerpt on Twilight Panthers that he had already memorized. Rubbing his eyes tiredly he asked, "Hermione, you mentioned shadow travel. Have you tested to see if someone else can piggyback along with?"

Hermione managed a small sheepish smile. "We did try it a couple of times with mixed results."

Remus arched an eyebrow; he had picked up the shy half answer so he continued, "And?"

Hermione blew a stray curl of her hair from her face and replied, "I can't ride along when I am in my human form. But, I can ride along in my animagus form."

Remus puzzled over this for a moment before his eyes lit up, "Of course, it must have something to do with mating pairs."

Hermione turned a red that would put most of the Weasleys to shame as Remus chuckled blushing lightly himself. "What I meant to say is that you are both Jaguars and therefore would be compatible as mates. But, I suppose that might have something to do with your human relationship as well. There truly are so very little known facts in regards to the animagus transformations other than how to transform, so anything I suggest would be mere conjecture."

Hermione nodded, her mind whirling with possible studies after Voldemort was gone before she pulled the topic back to the task at hand. "So do you think Harry and I popping into the room would be a good way to reveal his form?"

Remus frowned, "While I'm sure it would be good for a laugh, it lacks the panache of a marauder worthy prank." After pondering a few more moments Remus' eyes lit up and he exclaimed, "I think I've got it."

Hermione motioned for him to explain and with a rascally grin Remus said, "Ok, this is what we need to do..."

It was late at night and Harry could feel a slight tingle in his scar that was just disquieting enough to prevent sleep for the night. With a little help from his animagus form Harry was currently sitting on a balcony on the top floor of Grimmauld Place, which if the signs of dust and disuse were any indication hadn't been inhabited for many years.

It was strangely comforting to watch the occasional auto drive by with its lights shining brightly as it cut through the summer night. It was a muggy night and Harry was suitably dressed in a cut off t-shirt and a pair of shorts. The prophecy still was always tickling the back of his

mind, but he did think that he was coming to grips with his reality, even if it wasn't a surprise. There was a huge difference between a suspicion and a confirmed fact and that was the biggest issue he was having at the moment. Suspicions were safe and harmless to harbor, but a fact wasn't something you could bend to your favor.

It was strange Harry mused; a year ago he never would have even begun to guess where his life would be now. Sirius being free was a hope but not one Harry dared to believe would come true. Being with Hermione like he was now - it had never even occurred to him that the opposite sex would have been interested in him. Sure he thought about Cho and the older girls on the Quidditch team a bit, but having a relationship? It hadn't even filtered into his reality that such a thing could exist for him.

In a way it was terribly confusing and terrifying to have so much change in such a short time. But, if he could believe that magic existed and accept that statement at face value then he imagined having a good life wasn't an impossibility in its own right. It was hard to be angry at the fates for burdening him with being the one to kill or be killed in the face of Voldemort. After all, having Hermione, the Weasleys, Remus, Sirius, and all of his other friends it seemed a rather paltry sum to pay.

Suddenly the sky overhead opened up and the heavens began to rain down on him as though in answer to his thoughts. Smiling slightly Harry nodded to himself as much as any higher power as he transformed back into the Twilight Panther and vanished into the shadow below the exterior light on the balcony.

Two days later the great pranking of Sirius Black was to take place. In the end Remus had procured a night light with an unbreakable charm and some strong sticking charms. After some clever maneuvering Hermione had managed to install the night light directly above Sirius' bed; leaving shadows directly on the bed and the surrounding area.

Remus then added the part of the prank that would make it legendary. A small barely noticeable amplification and recording orb that would allow Sirius' expression to be placed in infamy along with those watching the spectacle live. Now it was all a matter of making Sirius

think he was in the clear, when in reality nothing could be further from the truth. In full, the twins, Ron, Ginny, and Remus were to join Sirius in the grand official unveiling of Harry's animagus form.

Sirius sat in his usual recliner as stories were traded amongst the adults and a general feeling of mirth pervaded Grimmauld Place for the first time ever as far as he was concerned. Harry and Hermione had managed to sell the twins and the younger Weasleys on a muggle game called charades.

At the moment Harry was flapping his arms like some kind of Fairy and Hermione was holding her sides from the painful laughter this had caused her. Ron was cleaning up the pumpkin juice he had snorted on Ginny after seeing his friend carry on. The twins appeared to be taking notes for something that probably had no good written all over it. In short, things were going quite well. A glance at the other side of the room revealed Remus and Tonks curled up on the couch near the fireplace. With a pang Sirius began to seriously consider rejoining the dating scene; he was happy but he was also lonely in many ways.

Suddenly all of the laughter and fun for the night didn't seem quite as bright and happy as it had a moment earlier. Sighing heavily he drained the last of his small glass of wine before excusing himself for the night.

Remus actually looked concerned for a moment as the remaining group huddled together. Tonks had been brought in when Remus had reluctantly admitted that any secrets he had would be dredged up by the pink haired metamorphmagus eventually.

"It's never good when Sirius looks that depressed. I can only think of one other time he was that bad, and that was when his brother Regulus took the dark mark," Remus commented in a concerned tone.

Harry nodded before he said, "Then nothing like a good prank to lift his spirits."

Remus laughed and said, "James would have said something exactly like that. Of course, then he would have turned Sirius's hair pink."

Harry nodded, "Well, I'm not my dad so I guess we'll have to resort to something else."

Remus took Harry's answer to heart and he smiled slightly, "Understood. Now, once I activate this charm you two won't have long before Sirius figures out something is going on. Why don't you transform now and give the rest of us a show."

Harry and Hermione both grinned and by appearances melted away into their forms, in a nearly seamless transformation. The twins were watching the proceedings with calculating gleams in their eyes as Ron exclaimed, "This is bloody brilliant!"

Ginny walked over and stroked both large cats on the head as she said, "Oh the both of you are just gorgeous. But, where did Harry's scar go?"

Remus shrugged, "It must be under his fur. Just like the rings that would signify his glasses. Actually, Minerva McGonagall is unique in that aspect of the transformation in that her spectacles become a part of her transformation."

Tonks was watching with rapt attention before she asked, "Unregistered I imagine?"

Both cats nodded their heads and she continued her thoughts. "I might have a legal solution for you, while still keeping your forms secret. I'll look into it."

Once again they nodded as Remus shrugged, "Ok you two prepare to shadow jump or whatever you call it." With a flick of his wand he continued, "Ok the charms have been activated, good luck."

Ron blinked. "What the bloody hell is shadow jumping?"

His answer was not forthcoming as Harry and Hermione tandem jumped into a shadow, disappearing with nary a sound.

A moment later they appeared next to Sirius' bed, which the hanging had already been drawn for, but from the sounds of annoyance the occupant of which was still awake.

A moment later with menacing growls two paws pulled the fabric aside on opposite sides of the bed. Sirius was yanking on the light, apparently having forgot he was a wizard as he cursed up a storm that would have put a sailor to shame.

Slowly he caught the sounds of two large and menacing creatures having surrounded his bed. While they had cleaned Grimmauld rather thoroughly there was a potential for doxies or other creatures still in the dark and dusty corners of the manor. Looking from the corner of his eyes he caught a large black blob crawling onto the large bed with its tail swinging slightly from side to side. With a start he glanced to his other side and a familiar looking spotted cat climbed onto the other bed just as the black cat pounced with its claws sheathed safely.

A moment later the other cat pounced and Sirius was startled by the sudden appearance of two wet bits of sandpaper licking his face. Unable to take any more Sirius screamed like a little girl, "Moldy Merlin's Man Bits! Moony help me!"

The two cats began to shake with what appeared to be mirth before they disengaged themselves from the thoroughly bewildered wizard. A second later Harry and Hermione transformed back into their human forms and Harry asked, "Merlin's man bits?"

Sirius flushed with understanding as he glanced back to the other side before he sighed, "Nice form Harry, you two got me."

After a moment he asked, "How did you two get in here? I have a locking charm on the door."

Harry grinned as he transformed back into his form and vanished into a shadow, only to reappear next to Hermione. After he transformed back Sirius's eyes widened. "You're a magical animagus?"

Harry grinned before his expression turned solemn. "This has to stay a secret Sirius. This is supposed to be an ace up my sleeve for the next time I face Voldemort. I couldn't use it in the graveyard because I was injured, so he still doesn't know about it."

Sirius nodded before he asked, "Who else knows both of your forms?"

Hermione replied, "You, Remus, Tonks, the twins, Ron, and Ginny are the only ones who know and we intend for it to stay that way. I've been working on a way to protect all of us from nosy people."

Sirius nodded approvingly as he made to climb out of his bed. "All right; all right I can take a hint. I admit it was a bit early for me to go to bed."

Hermione smiled, "Yes Remus told us that you could use a good pranking to pull you out of your funk."

Harry patted Sirius on the back. "You're family Sirius, we watch each other's back."

Sirius nodded, "We're family."

A/N: I apologize for my pre-chapter A/N rant, but the entire thing frustrates me to no end. Next chapter we finally have a little discussion between Dumbledore and Harry and the ministry will begin to bungle their way through some things. Also, Ron will get love advice from Hermione and Ginny...that will be fun to say the least.

Thanks to all of you that have read and thanks for the reviews.

Chapter 4

The next six days passed in the blink of an eye for Harry and the other occupants of Grimmauld Place, as was usually the case when having fun. The days were spent in an endless cycle of Occlumency lessons, wizard's chess matches and the twice weekly Order meetings.

"No, Ms. Granger you need to lure the Occlumens probe deeper into your mind before it will trigger your placed defenses. Now, let's do this again and if you succeed you will have learned all that I can teach you," Will stated with a hint of pride.

Harry had taken it upon himself to act as Hermione's personal masseuse following his successful completion of his own Occlumency training. While Hermione had initially been rather grumpy about Harry beating her to the end goal, Harry's magical hands quickly melted away any other displeasure.

Smiling slightly she nodded. "I understand what you're saying in theory, but I'm having some problems making this final visualization in my mind."

Harry leaned over and whispered, "It helped me to picture digging a pit and covering it with sticks and leaves."

Hermione shrugged as she pictured the scene before she said, "You watch too many cartoons Harry. But that reminds me. I have a movie you would like that I'll bring with us to Japan." Then she frowned and continued, "Right now you're distracting me. I need to concentrate on this."

Harry frowned before he stopped his neck rub and walked over to his seat on the other side of the room. His relationship with Hermione still baffled him from time to time and in the past couple of days she had emotionally pulled away. Hermione was typically at least somewhat sensitive to the fact that growing up with the Dursleys didn't afford him the chance to watch cartoons or anything else remotely normal as a kid.

The funniest thing was that Hermione hadn't even tried to make it a subtle shift; instead she had simply resorted to kissing him whenever they actually had a chance to talk. The fourteen-year-old hormonal guy in Harry had no real complaints with this shift, but the old soul within him did find it rather disconcerting. The one great strength Harry had found in his relationship with Hermione was that they communicated if one of them had a problem. Something about the Occlumency training had changed this dramatically for Hermione.

Hermione merely motioned with her hand as she prepared to be assaulted once again by Will, as had become their practice over the last two weeks.

She heard the older wizard murmur, "*Legilimens*." After a moment she felt the subtle tingle indicating her outer shields were being bypassed and she used the directional method of her choosing to steer the mental probe towards her trap. While Harry had utilized a hidden pit to capture and repel attacks Hermione decided something more akin to the picture of a bear trap as her means of repelling Will's attack.

While it was hidden deep in her personality, Hermione had a cold and calculating side that had grown from her years of exile in the muggle school systems. A less vindictive and calculating witch never would have went after Rita Skeeter for instance. If not for the fact that she was a muggleborn witch, the sorting hat may very well have viewed her personality as in line with the Slytherin ideals, which is a scary enough thought in its own right.

Granted, her personality had changed considerably since she made friends with Harry and Ron, but some scars never went away no matter how long they healed.

Will felt his way slowly, attempting to detect any traps as he neared the emotional nexus of Hermione's mind that would allow him to access deeper memories than just surface impressions and thoughts. Just as he reached for it he felt a vise-like pressure encompass his mind probe and all he was aware of was a blinding pain before he was expelled, forcefully snapping back into his mind and swaying in his seat.

Rubbing his forehead with a bit of wonder he muttered, "Yeah it looks like you've gotten it Ms. Granger. I do believe that there is nothing more that I can teach you about the obscure discipline called Occlumency. But, please I must ask that you never expel me in such a fashion ever again if the need arises. That was most unpleasant. I have had to use Legilimency on deatheaters and the type in the past before I became an obliviator. So I have seen all kinds of mental traps, and to date yours was the most painful and abrupt I have faced."

Harry watched the exchange carefully, looking for some sign or hint that might clue him in to Hermione's shift in behavior. The training had been much more trying on Hermione than it had on him and he had to imagine that had something to do with things. Unlike Hermione, who while perfect in theory lacked the power to stop a bull attack from Will; Harry had an overabundance of magical power and, like summoning his patronus, his ability to calm his mind while supplying magical power made mastering the skill surprisingly easy.

If there was one thing he was certain of, it was that even if he learned Occlumency faster than Hermione she would be the one that would have a better grasp of the art in the end. Will conjured a small glass of ice water and took a deep swig before he stood and said, "It has been a pleasure teaching both of you, and I hope that some day our paths might cross again."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "Aren't you going to tutor us in Legilimency also?"

Will rubbed at the back of his neck and replied, "Both mind arts aren't to be taught by the same instructor for fear of creating a mental link between the teacher and pupil."

Harry finally decided to chime in. "Can you recommend a tutor for Legilimency?"

Will replied, "Both your Headmaster and Potions Professor are registered practitioners of the craft as you would need be if you sought instruction."

Hermione stood from her own seat and gave Will a quick hug before Harry stepped in and shook hands with the man with whom they had shared some of their most intimate and painful memories. As Will left the library Hermione turned to Harry and softly said, "I'm proud of you Harry."

Harry gave her a lopsided grin, "So now you know how it feels for me whenever you do something particularly brilliant."

Hermione blushed and gave him a quick peck on the cheek before she said, "I'm going to get a shower, and then we can talk later."

Harry merely nodded with a slightly bemused expression on his face. Occlumency or not, Hermione always was good at sussing out what he was thinking at any given time. As Harry watched her leave he thought about the merits of getting a shower himself, when the door swung open to reveal a slightly harried looking Albus Dumbledore.

Hermione finished rinsing the shampoo from her hair and turned the water off of the shower at Grimmauld Place. Magic was great for many things and one of them was that it was easily able to provide a lengthy hot shower without any of the drawbacks that would be felt in a muggle household.

As she set about using a combination of her towel and a drying charm to simulate her blow dryer she heard some loud voices outside of the bathroom.

"Bloody hell Ginny, I'm not asking you for an arm or anything, just some advice about how to get a girlfriend," Ron's voice rang out.

Ginny's voice was more amused than anything else as she replied, "You're not asking for an arm you're asking for a miracle Ronniekins."

Hermione chuckled as she tried to think of Ron's request objectively, as a best friend and sister like figure. Ron was reasonably handsome and tall for his age; his manners were a bit off-putting but he did have a good personality and sense of humor. The question truly was: what does Ron actually want in a girl aside from being alive and interested? She snorted again, mentally reproaching herself for taking so much of the mick out of her poor beleaguered friend.

Pulling on a comfortable sweater to combat the draftiness of Grimmauld, even during the summer, she opened the door to the bathroom to see Ron and Ginny still going at it. Grinning she asked, "What's this about Ron needing a girlfriend?"

Ron groaned as Ginny managed a dainty cackle of sorts before she replied with her thumb jabbed at Ron, "Oh, Thicko here has been trying to convince me of the worthiness of his quest."

With a slightly pleading look Ron said, "Come on Hermione; think about how much rubbish things will be for you and Harry this year if I'm always loafing in your favorite snogging spots."

Hermione had a queer look on her face for a fleeting moment before she said, "If I agree to help you, you have to promise not to speak with your mouth full of food any more."

Ron's eyes widened before resolve set in as he nodded. Ginny merely shrugged, "I'll help too; after all it should be fun turning Ron into a clean and slightly less annoying git."

As Ron sputtered Hermione's thoughts quickly flashed back to Harry. Silently she wondered why things between them had changed since the Occlumency training started. A lifetime of memories had been dredged up in her Occlumency training that had prompted a subconscious move to do what she always had pre-Hogwarts, retreat into herself and refuse to rely on anyone else. But, instead of completely pulling away from Harry she still acknowledged him, but didn't confide in him beyond surface depth discussions. Following the ginger pair back to her and Ginny's shared room she pondered further, realizing that while she might have been responsible for most of the issues Harry had some hang ups too.

She mused as they entered the room, in a way it was sort of like the honeymoon being over between them, at least in as much as there were no more thoughts on the invincibility of what they shared. In fact in a way it was liberating, but it didn't mean she was tired of Harry. Quite the contrary really, but she didn't know what was next for them and that bothered her in a way she had never expected. With the first real settled feelings on their relationship that she had had in a few weeks, she vowed to talk with Harry as soon as she could get him

alone. However, she had spotted Dumbledore walking in Harry's direction after she left the library so it would be after dinner before she'd have a chance to get him alone. For now she could distract herself from that potentially unpleasant conversation, as they needed to start the rehabilitation of one Ron Weasley.

Harry watched the headmaster with an unreadable expression, his Occlumency shields firmly in place, before he spoke in a flat but respectful tone, "Hello headmaster, what can I do for you today?"

Dumbledore smoothed his robes and replied, "I was wondering if you might have time for a discussion."

Harry nodded and motioned the headmaster to a pair of reading chairs in the corner before sealing the door and casting a silencing charm on it, just in case. Dumbledore watched this all appraisingly but didn't say a word as he settled into the chair and patiently waited for Harry to situate himself as well.

After watching the bespectacled teen settle in he said, "I will not waste your time apologizing for my actions again Harry. But, I will promise you that I will do my best to make amends and correction for my past mistakes."

Harry nodded slowly and said, "I understand sir. But, I assume that wasn't what you wanted to talk about."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Once again you cut straight to the crux of my trip Harry. I wished to share some disturbing news that surfaced at the last Order meeting which may directly affect you and your friends."

Harry patiently smiled and took the bait. "I see, and what would that be Headmaster?"

Dumbledore's smile faltered slightly as he replied, "There has been a bit of a power struggle within the Ministry of Magic. Tell me Harry, do you know how the power structure of the Ministry of Magic is organized and perpetuated?"

Harry quirked a small smile and replied, "I discussed it with Mr. Weasley last summer sir. Two main branches, the legislative and executive, am I correct?"

Dumbledore nodded., "Quite correct; in fact when you are of age you may ascend to your hereditary seat on the Wizengamot if you should choose to do so." Waving his hand airily he continued, "But I digress, Harry. I bring this up because the power struggle has for the moment led to Cornelius Fudge having considerably more pull than a Minister of Magic typically has. While not as obvious as say, American muggle democracy, there are a series of checks and balances to prevent any one person from gaining too much power in the British Ministry of Magic."

Dumbledore continued, inwardly pleased as Harry soaked in this new information. "Department heads are generally lifelong appointments unless rampant corruption occurs within a department or a new Minister is selected. While not a high paying position, Arthur Weasley holds by most accounts a considerable amount of political power within the government. Typically, the department heads are in general agreement to block the Minister from seizing too much control of Ministry assets. However, recent revelations have resulted in three different factions vying for control, leaving the Minister the most powerful person in the Ministry to pick up the pieces and consolidate his base of power."

Harry nodded as he removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose in a move reminiscent of a man far his senior. Finally he wearily asked, "What are the three factions and what implications does this have for us Headmaster?"

Dumbledore peered down at Harry through his crescent shaped glasses for a long moment before he softly replied, "First, there is a faction of hardliners that will be taking much the same approach that the Ministry resorted to during the end of Voldemort's first reign of terror. This group is led by Amelia Bones and Barty Crouch Sr., and they wield a considerable amount of seniority and allies. Given time they will be able to gather enough support to reign in Cornelius, but it is time dangerously spent."

Harry merely nodded as Dumbledore continued, "The next faction is a group of moderates that do not think resorting to unforgivable curses and death sentences are the best way to confront the challenge of the times ahead. This group is led by Arthur Weasley and Amos Diggory. Bear in mind that the Ministry still hasn't acknowledged Voldemort's return officially, and only behind the scenes actions have shown any preparations. The problem inherent is that the moderates and hardliners are fighting for the same stable of ministry resources. This is not an issue for the final faction which is in the executive branch of the Ministry."

Harry grimaced, "Those two factions sound reasonable, so I assume you've saved the worst for last."

Dumbledore nodded grimly, "Indeed, and that is a very perceptive observation Harry. The final faction seeks to return the ministry to an age of conservative government, which means that purebloods will run roughshod over others for a time. This faction is led by Cornelius and his undersecretary, a most distasteful woman named Delores Umbridge. Lucius Malfoy still holds considerable sway, but Cornelius has wisely distanced himself from the man somewhat. While this faction remains in control, several rights of non-pureblooded witches and wizards will be repealed and other magical beings will be stripped of all rights altogether."

Harry nodded thoughtfully and asked, "So how does this bode poorly for us then sir?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry intently before he said, "Harry, whether you wish to acknowledge this or not you are a celebrated and revered member of the wizarding world." Upon seeing the distaste on Harry's face he continued, "I also must deal with the pitfalls of fame, my boy, so have no doubt that I understand your plight."

Harry nodded petulantly and said, "I know, but it doesn't mean that I have to like it."

Dumbledore chuckled, "That is true." His expression clouded. "As I've learned in my many years alive, politicians fear that which they cannot control or influence. We both represent such a minority, and

as such there are those that have ambitions against us, beyond the scope of Voldemort.”

Harry nodded, “I guess that makes sense.” Pondering aloud he added, “So Fudge and Umbridge are from this school of thought then?”

Dumbledore reached into a pocket of his purple robes and pulled a lemon drop which he popped in his mouth and sucked on contemplatively. Finally he replied, “It was written into the charter for Hogwarts roughly two hundred years ago that the Ministry could appoint one professor a year as a right. Madam Umbridge has been appointed to be the Defense professor for the coming year, and I believe you can see the implications of this.”

Harry nodded and then asked, “What about Professor Moody?”

Dumbledore grinned, “Ah yes, well you see Alastor has been reappointed as Senior Auror and he will be training and organizing the Auror squadron in conjunction with the Head Auror and Madam Bones. While his loss will be keenly felt at Hogwarts, I believe he did undo most of the damage Gilderoy Lockhart and Quirinus Quirrell bestowed during their own terms. Knowing Alastor as I do it will most likely involve my picking up the tab on our various dining excursions for many meals to pay this debt off.”

Harry frowned slightly but nodded before he changed topics. “Sir, do you think it’s necessary to learn Legilimency if you already know Occlumency?”

Dumbledore thought on this for a moment. “Legilimency is a restricted art for a reason Harry. Even those with the best of intentions can use the art for their own personal gain if they are not careful. If you wish I will teach you and Ms. Granger the art after you have graduated from Hogwarts.”

Harry nodded and Dumbledore smoothly shifted gears. “Feel free to tell your friends that your book lists should be coming the first week of August. For now, I have some other meetings which I must attend. If I do not see you on your birthday, have a happy birthday and safe vacation with the Grangers.”

Harry walked the headmaster to the door before following the old wizard out; he needed to get a shower and have a talk of some sort with Hermione at some point.

Ron really wasn't finding this as amusing as Ginny and Hermione were; the smattering of giggles as they talked quietly a few feet away was enough to press every single button Ron had installed.

"Ginny you're terrible to your poor brother. We have to take this seriously, because if he has a girlfriend it means you'll have some free reign yourself to find a boyfriend." Hermione scolded half heartedly.

Ginny raised her hands in a placating gesture as she glanced over at her brooding brother. "Ok, ok I get it. So let's start with girls that might be interested in him and work from there."

Hermione nodded and said, "Well Lavender has always thought he's cute, but Parvati doesn't care much for him after how he treated Padma at the Yule Ball. What about the girls in your year Ginny?"

Ginny arched her eyebrow. "What you aren't even going to consider any of the older girls?"

Hermione fixed the younger witch with a look and said, "Ginny, Ron needs a girl that isn't more mature than him. An older girl would just destroy his confidence, and then it would be even harder to find him a girlfriend."

Ginny nodded, conceding the point as she replied, "Well I'd say Gretchen and Abby would go for Ron, but it might be more because he's Harry Potter's friend."

Hermione frowned and said, "Well, it's not like he is going to marry any of these girls and I'd prefer it was a Gryffindor girl so we could deal with her if there is a problem."

Ginny giggled quietly, "This is horrible, we're playing matchmaker for my brother."

Hermione rolled her eyes before she replied, "Well it wasn't on my list of things to do either Gin, but I don't mind doing it. I mean if it makes Ron happy then I'm willing to bite the bullet."

Ginny looked confused. "Why would you bite a bully?"

Hermione sighed, "Just forget I said anything. So, do you think we should write Lavender and see what she thinks of Ron?"

Ginny scrunched her nose up, "Well we should probably ask Lunko if he even likes her."

Hermione nodded her agreement and turned towards Ron, raising her voice as she asked, "Ron, what do you think of Lavender?"

Shrugging he replied, "She's filling out nicely and she's alright when she isn't all giggly."

Hermione growled and Ginny groaned as they both shouted at him, "Honestly Ronald, I thought you said you were going to improve your manners!"

Ron look baffled. "What, I thought I was complimenting her!"

Hermione and Ginny's groans reverberated throughout the room; this was going to take a bit longer than they had originally thought.

It was after lunch when Harry and Hermione finally managed to get alone for their talk. As they settled into their spots on the couch Hermione burrowed her head into Harry's shoulder before she said, "I'm sorry."

Harry pulled back slightly and asked, "What exactly are you sorry for?"

Hermione sighed and then shrugged, "I don't know really. This has been a hard week for me I guess, and in a way I let it affect us."

Harry nodded as he ran a hand through Hermione's bushy hair, somehow managing to miss every tangle as he did. Finally after a couple of minutes of idly combing her hair with his fingers he said, "I

don't expect you to be perfect Hermione. I just want you to be yourself, that's how you got me in the first place."

Hermione mumbled into his shoulder, "Oh, it was me who got you, was it?"

Harry chuckled and his voice dropped lower, "Of course, who wouldn't want me?"

Hermione punched him in the arm but rubbed it softly as she said, "Of course, I fall in love with stupid prats all the time."

Harry smiled against the side of her head as he kissed her softly before he said, "I just want you to know that you can talk to me about anything."

Hermione sighed and was about to reply when a shout could be heard by the FLOO place prompting the pair to spring off the couch and sprint towards the entrance room, their wands in hand.

Remus was tending to a sandy haired wizard who was bleeding quite badly from a wound on his abdomen as other Order members buzzed around in a flurry of activity. Sirius spotted Harry and Hermione and sternly asked, "What are you two doing here?"

Harry quickly replied, "We heard a sound and we thought we could help."

Sirius glanced over at the bleeding wizard for a moment before he sighed, "If you want to help have Dobby get some boiling water and blood replenishing potion while you two get some towels and gauze from the master bathroom. There are going to be more injured people coming here, so get as much as you can."

Harry nodded and called for Dobby. The little elf was informed of the situation and vanished with a pop a moment later before Harry himself took off up the stairs at a dead sprint on his way to the master bathroom next to Sirius's room. Hermione glanced around and started to move some furniture into the room for the injured as Sirius nodded appreciatively.

After bringing several of the Victorian era couches into the room Hermione asked, "What happened here Sirius?"

Sirius shrugged slightly, as Madam Pomfrey had since arrived and taken charge of things, before he replied, "A series of attacks against a variety of targets. Unfortunately, I can't do any good out there because I need to stay to allow visitors into the wards of the house."

Hermione merely nodded. While the prospect of facing Death Eaters wasn't exactly a pleasant one, having to wait to see who was the next victim wasn't a whole lot better.

Harry came running down the stairs with a duffel bag stuffed full of supplies which he handed to Madam Pomfrey. The matronly healer smiled and pulled some of the gauze from the bag and began to apply it where possible. Harry was dabbing his brow as he walked over to Sirius and Hermione with a question written all over his face.

Sirius quickly relayed the same set of facts to his godson as he had to Hermione when the FLOO place flared to life and Dumbledore stepped through, a blood sodden small body in his arms, grief and horror written all over his typically serene face.

A moment later Colin Creevy, also bloodied, stepped through the fireplace followed by Tonks, her normally pink hair darkened by blood and soot. Suddenly with a feeling of dread Harry ushered Colin to an open seat and helped as Remus checked the eldest Creevy brother for injuries.

Colin's lower lip trembled before he whimpered, "Dennis saved me."

Harry frowned as he glanced across the room and watched Madam Pomfrey work frantically on the bundle too small to be Dennis Creevy. He cleared his throat, "Colin, who is that over there?"

Colin blinked owlishly as he shivered unconsciously before he answered. "D-Dennis is dead Harry. They killed him without a second thought after he pushed me out of the way of that green curse, and then Sarah th-they tried to do horrible stuff to her. Why would they do that to a ten-year-old girl?"

Harry swallowed thickly as he fought off the urge to vomit. He glanced over at the pale and trembling Hermione before he said, "Just relax for a bit Colin, I'll get you some dreamless sleep potion and if you want we can talk tomorrow." Hermione summoned a blanket and wrapped it around Colin's shoulders gently as Remus handed the blonde boy a vial of potion and helped him tip it back as he succumbed to sleep.

Harry sought out Dumbledore, looking nothing like the typically powerful and wise wizard as he simply watched the traffic of patients being treated and set to sleep. Quietly he said, "What happened today sir?"

Dumbledore wearily replied, "Tom has announced his return to the wizarding world at large. I was at the Ministry when I was informed of the attacks and Fawkes took me to the Creevy's residence. The events at the small muggle house will haunt me for a long time my boy."

Harry frowned. "I haven't felt anything in my scar today."

Dumbledore waved his hand. "You've mastered Occlumency Harry, the only way you will feel something from Tom is if it is forced across the link you share with him."

Harry sighed. "It might have saved some people today if we had some warning though."

Dumbledore quickly dismissed this. "Nonsense Harry, Tom might feel happiness or displeasure in quantities so extreme for the most trivial of things that it would not be a reliable means of gathering information. In no way were the attacks today your fault or your responsibility. Tom wished to attack the homes of lesser known muggleborn students today, because I believe he understands that Ms. Granger and students like Mr. Finch-Fletchley will have superior security details."

Harry sighed in frustration, "I just feel so helpless here sir."

Dumbledore patted Harry gently on the shoulder with his hand and said, "I do not wish to demean you Harry, but you train now and

attend school so that you will take your place in the war when your skills match your noble intentions.”

Harry nodded and bid the headmaster a goodbye before seeking out Hermione, who was consoling a distraught Tonks with Remus. Vaguely Harry wondered where the Weasleys were, but he immediately realized that Molly had probably sealed them all in their rooms to spare them some of the images Harry knew would haunt him for a very long time.

Hermione was hugging herself tightly as though to protect herself from an attack as Harry wrapped his arm around her waist, and she spun in his arms and began to sob into his shirt. Hermione was easily one of the strongest people Harry knew, and still he could understand her feelings because he was emotionally a knife's edge from having a good cry himself.

Exhausted, Harry and Hermione stumbled up the stairs after another couple of hours in the makeshift hospital ward. With no thoughts to propriety or appearance, Hermione changed into her pajamas and crawled into Harry's bed seeking comfort and the strength that the day had drained from her.

It was a strange and hauntingly beautiful silence that descended upon Grimmauld Place that next morning. The injured had been transferred to St. Mungo's in the wee hours of the morning, and the adults that occupied the house had found the nearest soft surface and promptly collapsed. Dumbledore had offered lodging to anyone who wanted it at Hogwarts and the combined efforts of Dobby and Mrs. Weasley had left the house looking nothing like a reasonable person would expect it to.

Harry slowly opened his eyes as he awoke, recognizing the soft and warm presence draped over his torso as Hermione before he reached over to his bed stand and grabbed his glasses bringing the world swimming back into focus. Surprisingly his dreams had been sparse and had not included the horrors of the previous night; perhaps it was due to his extreme exhaustion as much as anything else.

A persistent but not overly loud knock at the door awoke Hermione who proceeded to stretch against Harry like a large cat and sending

Harry's blood rushing to an obvious region. After straightening their appearances as much as they could, Harry crawled out of bed and walked over to the door, opening it to reveal the very anxious and curious looking youngest siblings of the Weasley family.

Ron peered in the room and spotted a still disheveled looking Hermione watching from the edge of the bed and his eyes bugged out before Harry said, "What do you guys want?"

Ron couldn't help but ask, "Did you two?"

Harry fixed him with a look that clearly communicated that he wasn't amused before he said, "People can share a bed and not doing anything Ron. But, what Hermione and I do in my room really isn't up for discussion here. Now, please tell me what you guys want?"

Ron shook his head and glanced over at Ginny, whose expression became very determined to show her support for him. "Mum locked us all in our rooms last night, and we were wondering if you two might know why that was."

Harry glanced back at Hermione, who was worrying her lip with her teeth before he softly answered, "There were a bunch of attacks yesterday Ron, and we helped with some of the wounded. If you'd like to know more I'm sure someone downstairs will have gotten a copy of the Prophet."

As Ron and Ginny nearly sprinted from the doorway of Harry's room the bespectacled wizard turned back to Hermione and gave her a sad broken smile that spoke volumes about the state of things. Voldemort was back with a vengeance, which was the only thing that mattered now.

A/N: Well there it is, another chapter for your reading pleasure. The plot for the summer and for the story has officially been set into motion. Unlike in canon Voldemort isn't skulking in the shadows simply because he is actually smart and is willing to use his advantage. In canon I get the feeling Voldemort is a perverse evil bugger, but not the sharpest shovel in the shed.

The Voldemort in this series will be Hitler and Moriarity rolled all into one. Accept that now because death will be coming for many characters we all know of.

Now the question of the chapter for all of you:

Shipping aside, what one thing has drawn you to the Harry Potter books and fan fictions in the first place? Was it the movies, actually reading the books as they were released or something else? This is a little bit different, but hey I like to see what kind of people make up our little online community.

Thanks to all of you that have read and reviewed.

Chapter 5

“Think about it Cornelius, these attacks on the muggleborn were a message to you and your legacy. You have grown lax and lazy by granting the muggle spawn far too many liberties; you make them obvious targets.” Lucius Malfoy drawled as he swirled his glass of wine.

Cornelius Fudge sighed heavily. “Lucius, you are placing me in a very untenable situation just with your presence here today. I have only agreed to meet you because Delores assures me you have something important to discuss. Also, meeting you less than twenty-four hours following the single largest set of coordinated attacks on magical people since You-Know-Who’s first ascent looks very bad for me.”

Lucius smirked lightly before he took a sip of his wine and replied, “You must understand Cornelius that you have been presented with a great and wonderful opportunity. You and you alone have the power to preserve our heritage in the light of these unfortunate attacks.”

Fudge scoffed. “Don’t play me for a fool Lucius. It may have worked in the past but I have learned much since then.”

Malfoy gave him a slightly sneering smile. “You forget your place you bumbling fool. If not for me you never would have been in this office in the first place.”

Fudge pulled his bowler hat from his head. “That may be true, but I owe you nothing Lucius. Lest we forget who opened the channels to guarantee your freedom in the first place. I assume you wouldn’t have been in a state to do much of anything aside from drool, had the Dementors had their way with you.”

Malfoy gave him an oily smile. “I had wondered how long it would take you to embrace your Slytherin traits Cornelius. This pleases me greatly for you to show me this side. You will gain much if you look over the set of proposals I have placed on your desk. For now I will leave you to your task; however I will call upon you again and refusal will not be an option at that time.”

Fudge gulped audibly. Lucius's unveiled threat surely involved the madness of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and frankly terrified him beyond belief. He managed to reply, "I'll take your words into consideration Lucius."

Lucius smirked as he stood from his seat, thrusting his snake head cane under his arm before he said, “You are a great many unsavory things Cornelius, but stupid is not one of them. You’ll do well to think of that before we meet again.” With an arrogant flourish he swept out of the Minister’s office with his cloak lightly billowing behind him.

Glancing over at a portrait on the far wall of what appeared to be a secretary sitting behind a desk he said, "Lorraine get Delores up here posthaste, we have much to discuss." As the woman in the portrait disappeared to relay the message Cornelius dabbed at his forehead nervously. He truly hated dealing with Lucius.

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After cuddling for another hour or so after Ron's departure with some tentative touches by both of a more intimate nature, Harry and Hermione finally crawled out of bed with the unpleasant task of picking through the carnage of the previous night.

Glancing over at the shower in his room Harry yawned, "I'm going to get a shower, but you're free to join me if you want."

Hermione swatted him in the head as she yawned also. "Prat." Rubbing the spot she swatted she added, "I'll see you downstairs in about a half an hour."

Harry nodded and she gave him a quick peck on the cheek, taking care not to expose him to her morning breath before she took off in the direction of her shared room with Ginny. Harry walked into the shower and for the first time noticed some blood caked in under his fingernails from one of the last people that had been brought in to Grimmauld.

They had been a pair of muggles, simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, targets of some overzealous Death Eaters that were preparing to cap off their escape. Apparently this attack had taken

place around dusk in a little suburb of Manchester, and the injured pair was out for a walk with their dog when the attack happened at the house on the end of their little cul-de-sac. The dog had been cleaved into two parts with the first wave of spells, and in the second wave the man had lost his left leg below the knee while the wife had been hit with a cutting hex that had opened her up from her right shoulder down to her belly button.

Harry had been assigned the job of keeping the woman, now in shock, awake as Madam Pomfrey went about cleaning the cursed wound before healing it seamlessly leaving nary a scar aside from the one on his psyche. As the blood was scrubbed away Harry shivered as he thought of the evil that Voldemort and his followers were capable of. After washing the grime and blood from his hair he turned the water off, and tried to prepare himself to see Sirius and the others.

Dressing in a short sleeved button up white shirt and a pair of khaki shorts Harry slid on a pair of sandals looking like a normal muggle teenager on summer holidays from school. Of course, as he looked into the mirror in his bathroom he shook his head with a wistful smile on his face. Sure it would be nice to be normal, but he wouldn't give up what he had now for anything.

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In a very slow walk that clearly communicated just how much he wanted to face everyone in the house alone, he glanced down at Hermione and Ginny's room praying to see some sign of her. Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be and when he finally made it down the stairs the grandfather clock near the base of the stairs read 11:30 AM, so he could say that he had gotten up in the morning. Unfortunately any real chance of smiling at his own inherent goofiness was squelched as he glanced around and could smell the faint remnant of death and despair.

Harry knew that the house had been cleaned, but he also knew that it would be a long time before he could look upon much of it and still be free of that indefinable unpleasant aspect.

Walking into the dining room he smiled very weakly at the assembled group; Ginny popping out of her seat and giving him a soft sisterly

hug. Molly looked at him intently for a moment but eventually figured that Hermione, and Ginny to a lesser extent, could offer him comfort better than she could at the moment.

Harry took his seat to the right of Sirius, who eyed him with a speculative but warm expression before he said, "Morning Harry, feeling alright?"

Harry nodded mutely, glancing across the table at the genuine concern written all over Remus's face. Finally he spoke in a voice thick with emotion, "It's just I can still see and feel all of the pain from last night."

Sirius reached over and squeezed his shoulder and replied, "You'll always have those memories Harry, but they will fade with time. Let's talk later ok?" Harry nodded and began serving himself some of the food from the table when Hermione entered, her hair magically done in plaits, also looking very much like a typical muggle teen.

She sat down at the empty seat to Harry's left and looked over at Ron before she said in her typically bossy voice, "So Ronald, are you ready to start some OWL review by revising your notes?"

Ron's groan was all of the answer she needed so she said, "This year Ronald we are going to try something different at school. I won't nag you on any of your homework..." Ron's whoop of triumph was met with an icy glare before she continued, "But, I don't want to hear you complain to me about your grades or beg to see my notes to copy them."

Ron looked indignant for a moment before he replied, "Sure, it's not like I'm stupid Hermione, I can do my work when I need to." Hermione's answer was a non-committal sound before she turned her attention back to Harry.

"Are you ok Sweets, you look a little pale?" Hermione asked as she felt Harry's forehead in an eerily maternal move.

Harry smiled softly as he took a bite of some homemade bread before he swallowed and replied, "I'm fine, just had a bit of a moment remembering last night."

The twins' eyes had immediately lit up upon hearing the term of endearment but one warning look from Molly had ended their plans in the planning stage for once.

Hermione accepted his answer and served herself some of the spaghetti Dobby had made and a small slice of garlic bread to go with it. Lunch was surprisingly amiable despite the gloom of the previous night, and while Harry didn't speak a lot he did have a small smile on his face listening to the twins and Sirius discuss future prank ideas.

At the end of lunch Moody arrived through the Floo stomping in, with a copy of the day's *Prophet* fisted in his non-wand hand. Glancing around he handed the paper to Harry before he grunted, "I heard you saw the results of the attack firsthand last night Potter."

Harry nodded slowly as he smoothed the paper so Moody continued, "Unlike a few in the Order I figure you should know what you are going to be facing if nothing else. The *Prophet* gives you accurate numbers and details, even if they cover up who actually carried out the attacks." Moody grunted once more before he took a seat near the end of the table and served himself some of the remaining food.

Neither Sirius nor Remus said a word as Harry folded the paper back up and finished his meal without sparing the piece of parchment another glance.

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It was nearly an hour later when Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Ron had clustered around the paper and read the front page, which was complete with a burning house and body bags.

### *Widespread Attacks Against Muggleborn Families*

By: Rita Skeeter

*Last night several attacks were perpetrated solely against muggleborn witches and wizards and their families. Casualties were common and there were 10 confirmed deaths with three of them currently enrolled at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

*Below is a list complete with confirmed medical reports from the staff of St. Mungo's on the current condition of surviving victims.*

***Dennis Creevy 3rd year Gryffindor house killed***

***Unnamed girl 10 years old, sexual assault victim currently under observation***

***Devin McNerney 13 years old Hufflepuff house severe injuries to legs***

***Teresa and Steven McNerney 34 and 35 years old muggles killed***

The list continued down the rest of the page as a second year Ravenclaw girl and Forth year Hufflepuff boy were also amongst the list of confirmed casualties.

Perhaps the most shocking passage was the investigative aspect of the article.

*Several confirmed ministry sources have suggested the attacks were carried out by a confederation of half breed werewolves and vampires seeking more rights after having many lost in the past few years. Madam Amelia Bones gave us this statement, "At the moment we have no real leads as to the actual culprits and accusing anyone at this time would be hasty and unwarranted. If any retaliatory attacks against the reported suspects are found to happen the attacking parties will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."*

*With such staunch words by the head of the DMLE this reporter has to wonder what if anything the Ministry plans to do in regards to these attacks. Perhaps the most troubling thought is that the Ministry no longer protects its constituents. This reporter sincerely hopes that this isn't the case in the face of such a threat.*

Harry released an explosive breath before he said, "So I see the Ministry is still in denial about Voldemort's return."

Ron hummed his agreement. "Well, I reckon without the Dark Mark in the sky above the houses they can keep saying that."

Hermione nodded slowly with a thoughtful look on her face. "Of course, but I think there is something important we're missing here."

Harry sighed. "Professor Dumbledore spoke to me yesterday before everything got crazy. The Ministry has splintered into three factions, and one of them is a very conservative pro-pureblood group. I think he said it was this Umbridge woman and Fudge leading that group."

Hermione groaned. "Oh no, Umbridge is the one who passed all of the anti-werewolf legislation. Of course, she would try to blame it on werewolves and vampires."

Looking at the blank faces of her friends she shook her head. "Do any of you read the *Prophet* aside from the Quidditch standings?"

They all shared a laugh for a moment, before Ginny asked, "Harry, how bad was it last night?"

Harry passed the question on to Hermione with a look who softly replied, "It was bad Ginny, and we'd prefer not to have to relive it any more than we already have."

Ginny looked slightly abashed, fighting against her naturally inquisitive nature, which had gotten her into trouble more times than not. She merely nodded before Harry injected a change of topic, "Dumbledore also told me that the book lists should come within a week of my birthday. So we should have those before Hermione and I go on vacation."

Ron frowned. "Are you sure it's safe to go on holiday what with all of the attacks?"

Hermione replied, "We'll be blending into the muggle world Ron, and that offers as much protection when we go abroad as anything else. Also, my mum and dad arranged for the tickets to be in their friends' names. The only place where anyone will see our names will be at the passport checks, and it's not like a wizard will be sitting around for us there."

Hermione bit her lip. "That reminds me Harry, you still need to get your passport from Gringotts."

Harry nodded. “I have an appointment with a goblin named Flashrock the day after my birthday. I’ll be taking the Floo straight into his office, getting my picture taken and getting the passport before I Floo back.”

Hermione nodded and the rest of the day was spent doing a bit of revision for OWL exams and listening to Ron and Ginny bicker as they played chess.

The most entertaining thing of the day for Harry came when Hermione walked over to Ron and said, "Ok, Ginny and I are going to send a letter to Lavender seeing if she is interested in you at all."

Harry grinned devilishly. "Oy what's this about writing a letter to Lavender?"

Ron groaned. "Great. Thanks a lot Hermione, now Harry knows. Like I need that to worry about too."

Harry chuckled. "Is ickle Ronnikins trying to get a girlfriend with the girls' help?"

Hermione shot Harry a warning look. "Drop it Harry, not all of you boys can be lucky enough to have someone as patient as me around. Merlin knows why I put up with you."

Harry's grin faltered and he said, "I'm sorry, I was just..." Sighing heavily Harry shrugged before he stood and left the room.

Hermione frowned as she rubbed her temples. “Thanks Ron, now I have to go apologize to Harry because your pride had to make an appearance. Ginny please explain what the deal is to the git.” Hermione sniffed once before she picked up both hers and Harry’s notes and quills and left the room to finish their talk from the day before.

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As soon as Hermione disappeared Ginny swatted Ron in the head and said, "I'm going to say this once Ron. You will be a better friend to Harry and Hermione or you will lose them. You find it perfectly alright to tease them when the mood strikes you but when Harry

teases you, you can't take it. You have to let go of this stupid idiotic boy pride that seems to crop up at the most inappropriate time."

Ron rubbed his head from Ginny's smack before he sighed and hung his head with defeat and muttered, "It's just hard you know. I mean compared to Harry and Hermione I'm a bloody joke. My family is poor, my grades are rubbish, and my pet is a menace. I bet Harry will be named prefect and eventually head boy with Hermione as the head girl, and my claim to fame will be as Harry Potter's goofy sidekick. I can't even say best friend any more because Hermione is his best friend."

Ginny looked at Ron like he was the smallest insignificant bug in the world before she said, "I thought you got all of this out of your system this past year. Ron you can't compare yourself to others to find your own worth. Be Ron Weasley and everything else will take care of itself. If you try to be someone you aren't then you are never going to be happy with what you get no matter how much you think you want it. Have you not listened to dad in the past? Now I expect you to step up and apologize to Harry and Hermione after they've patched things up between them."

Ron grimaced as he looked up at his sister, standing there with both hands on her hips in a stance eerily reminiscent of his mother. "I-I will Ginny, I promise."

Ginny merely arched her eyebrow before she flounced away to read more of the newest *Teen Witch Weekly* and let Ron stew in the mess he had made.

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Hermione found Harry in his room doing some push-ups trying to take his mind off of things. She meekly sat down on his bed and watched him do fifty before she said, "I'm sorry Harry; I guess I've been a little frayed after everything last night too."

Harry merely nodded as he pulled himself into a sitting position before he said, "I know, but I do think we need to finish our talk that we never had a chance to yesterday."

Hermione nodded and he added, "Let me wash up a bit, and then we can talk."

A few minutes later Harry returned washed up and with a small smile on his face that he reserved for Hermione alone. Being a teenager was a great many things, but having to avoid acne was one of his least favorite aspects of it. Fortunately, Harry was well aware he had good genetics because he had only had one pimple ever; making him feel very fortunate he wasn't more like Eloise Midgen.

As he returned he noticed Hermione had dozed off on his bed. In all honesty he couldn't blame her, it was easily the most comfortable bed he ever had once it had been broken in a bit.

Sitting next to her, seeing her face relaxed and free of the horror of the previous night, he had an odd compulsion to take this precious girl and run away from all of the madness and death. Leaning down he kissed her lips gently, tenderly before he pulled away and smiled at her slowly opening eyes. She smiled so sweetly that he couldn't help but kiss her again before he finally pulled away and murmured, "You have no idea how much this pains me but, we do need to talk."

Hermione nodded and slid until her back was flat against the headboard on Harry's bed as she said, "First, I want to explain what was going through my mind this past week." Harry nodded and crossed his legs as he sat across from her waiting patiently.

Hermione steeled herself. "I was a bit of a loner growing up Harry. I mean I hadn't any real close friends and the few times I tried to make friends it ended with me in tears. I've always loved books and reading, but after having my heart broken a couple of times I really retreated into books alone. When I got my Hogwarts letter I was so scared and hopeful at the same time. I knew that I had another chance to make friends, but I also had grown to the point that books seemed to sustain me. It was an illusion of course. I mean in my years of friendship with you, Ron, and Ginny I can see now how empty that life was."

Harry nodded and with an understanding smile said, "I know that feeling Hermione."

Hermione reached to Harry and took one of his hands between both of hers as she continued, “I know that Harry, and this wasn’t your fault at all. This Occlumency training just dredged up all of that pain and rejection and I just wasn’t prepared to deal with it again. I’m sorry if I made it seem like it was your fault, but trust me you made it so much better by being as understanding as you were. That meant the world to me and the only way I could show my appreciation was to snog your brains out.”

Harry smiled as she caressed his hand lovingly before she added, "That being said, I like that we can sit here and talk like this Harry. I mean, I'll never try to force you to talk about emotions and things like this, because I know you have a hard time expressing yourself from time to time. But that you are willing to make the effort to keep both of us happy, it makes me love you a lot."

Harry chuckled softly before he leaned in and said, "I don't think you can do anything to make me love you more than I do right now. But, I am always prepared for you to surprise me." The next hour was spent with Hermione trying to do just that.

[illegible]

Ron's apology had been a rather anti-climactic affair seeing as he took advantage of their post snog giddiness to obtain forgiveness for being a bit too thin skinned.

After everything, Hermione and Ginny composed the letter to Lavender the following day:

Lavender,

Ginny and I are just writing to make sure you weren't affected by the attacks a couple of days ago, and to ask you a question. You see, we've been cooped up all summer so we haven't had much of anything to do aside from gossip and talk about the Gryffindor boys. I know, I know Hermione Granger doesn't gossip and girl talk, well things change I guess.

Anyways, Ginny seemed to think that you might fancy Ron some, and seeing as how he is one of my best friends I figured I'd ask you and

give you my blessing to pursue him if you wanted to. I mean I might not seem like I listen when you and Parvati chatter about boys, but I do and I know that a lot of girls never really approached Harry or Ron because they were scared of how I'd react. Well, Harry and I are together now, so you don't have to worry about that if you want to go after Ron. Merlin knows the prat is lovable most of the time.

I'm sending this with Harry's owl Hedwig so please give her some water and if you have any owl pellets that would be nice too. If you would like to give it a go with Ron write us back and Ginny and I will smooth things over for you. Please send a reply back soon, as I'll be out of the country the second week of August.

Hermione

Hedwig dutifully took the letter and took flight from the second floor window at Grimmauld Place. She was the only owl that had been fully keyed into and past the ancient manor's various wards, so her trips were kept to a minimum for safety concerns.

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The days before Harry's birthday did settle from the horror of what was now being dubbed "The Muggleborn Massacre" by the *Daily Prophet*. Harry and Hermione spent a lot of time finishing their summer homework assignments, but they also found time to just relax and get some exercise.

The Order was very active the week following the massacre with several meetings to address Voldemort's first salvo of the new war. The meetings were as much about smoothing some ruffled feathers because the attacks had shaken many of the members even more so than Harry had been. Tonks was having problems controlling her metamorphagus abilities and Hestia Jones, a frumpy looking middle aged witch, had called in sick for the past three days from her job as a Ministry interrogator.

If those two examples had proven anything to Dumbledore it was that many of the members in the Order would not make an effective fighting force if it came down to it.

As the Order meeting adjourned on the eve of Harry's birthday, said boy wizard was in the midst of a wonderfully sweet snogging and heavy petting session with Hermione. Hermione was straddling Harry's lap as he sat with his back against the headboard of his bed. Her hands were running across his back and back to his chest in a terribly distracting but arousing display. One of Harry's hands was under her spaghetti strap top copping a very nice feel as their tongues dueled in a lazy kiss while the other was wrapped around her lower back to support her.

If there had been any worries about it being awkward initially between them due to their friendship, they had been determined to be completely unfounded. Finally, Hermione broke the kiss and spun in his lap so she was leaning her back against his chest. Of course this had led to a terrible tangle of Harry's hands in her tank top, which was quickly fixed amidst Hermione's giggles and his abject mortification.

Harry's hands eventually found their place as they locked together wrapping his arms about her waist. Hermione was absently playing with the end of his mesh shorts that he had been using as pajama bottoms when she said, "So you turn fifteen tomorrow, do you think you'll feel any different?"

Harry smiled into her hair and gave her a muffled, "I don't know."

She giggled at the feel of Harry speaking into her hair and she said, "We're going to have so much fun in Japan Harry. Mum and dad are leaving the day after your birthday, and when we get there a week later we can just relax a bit from everything. It will be just a week of being normal muggle teenagers, so no magic or anything like that. Although I think Dad wants to take you out golfing, so you'll have to use that magical Potter charm."

Harry pulled away from her hair and rested his chin on her shoulder. "I've never been golfing before, so I hope your dad doesn't have any great expectations."

Hermione reached her hand back and caressed Harry's cheek, "I think he just wants to get you alone for a man to man talk. I don't

think he'll threaten you too much about hurting his baby girl, especially after all of the stories I've told him about you."

Harry nodded as he turned slightly to the side and began to nibble on her ear lobe as she sighed, "Harry, we do need to get to bed eventually tonight."

She could feel Harry's smirk against her ear and she said, "Separate beds prat. It might be your birthday tomorrow but even you aren't getting that as a present yet."

Harry finally ceased his actions and said, "Yeah you're right." After a moment he asked, "Have you gotten a letter back from Lavender yet?"

Hermione rolled out from his arms and crossed her legs so she was now facing Harry before she replied, “Yes, and I think it would be a safe bet that Lavender and Ron will be going on a date to the first Hogsmeade weekend.”

Harry yawned and reached his arms out with one last request for a hug, which Hermione quickly complied with. Breaking the hug she stepped off from the bed, the soft patter of her feet being the only sound for a moment before she said, "Good night Harry."

Harry rolled onto his side and mumbled sleepily, "Night 'Mione."

Hermione rolled her eyes at the mumbled/butchered shortening of her name and left the room to her sleepy boyfriend, hopeful that the party the next day would be able to make up for all of the birthday parties he missed growing up.

[illegible]

Harry awoke as light crept into his room through the window, tickling the edge of his unconscious senses enough to rouse him. He smiled slightly as he blinked his eyes reaching over to the bed stand for his glasses. For the first time in his life he was really looking forward to his birthday and with that in mind he rolled out of bed and doing a limited bit of wandless magic he waved his hand remaking his bed.

Walking over to his wardrobe Harry grabbed a different pair of khaki shorts, these ones longer and baggier than the ones he wore the previous day, a Bolton Wanderers away jersey that he had picked up the previous summer while staying with Hermione, and once again decided on sandals.

After a nice refreshing shower and the customary brushing of his teeth Harry took a bit of gel and spiked his hair exposing his scar more than he ever did in the process. Harry wandered down to the dining room to find everyone else in the house already up.

Harry smiled at everyone and said, "Morning everybody."

Molly walked over to Harry and gave him a tight hug before she pulled away, "Oh my, don't you look handsome today." Harry blushed and she winked, "Come now dear we have a nice birthday breakfast for you. Cake and presents will be later."

Harry took his customary seat between Sirius and Hermione, the older wizard ruffling his styled hair before he said, "I like the hair pup, makes you look like a right rogue it does."

Harry chuckled as Hermione gave him a quick peck on the cheek before she asked, "Didn't you buy that last summer?"

Harry yawned but nodded, "Yeah, wearing it for the first time today."

Hermione blushed before she leaned in and whispered, "For what it's worth you'd make a sexy footballer."

Harry grinned and began piling his plate with food. Ron was on the other side of the table already done devouring his first plate and began to heap seconds when Molly said, "Ronald you need to save some room for the cake later."

Everyone save Molly laughed as Harry explained with a grin, "I imagine Ron would explain to you why he eats like he does. But, since his mouth is full let me. Ahem...Ron is a growing boy and it must be a growth spurt of some sort."

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Harry walked out of the room and George pounced, putting a blindfold on Harry, and causing him to flail his arms wildly for a moment, managing to catch the redhead in the head with one of his swings. Hermione sighed. "I told you to just ask him to put the blindfold on George. Now you're going to have a shiner because you snuck up on him."

Harry merely nodded and he was led a few more feet before encountering a raucous yell of, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY!"

Remus grinned and pulled him into a hug. The full moon was already past for the month and he was lucky that in August it came during the day, meaning he wouldn't undergo the full transformation but instead just be very irritable and territorial.

He softly said, "Sirius and I have something for both you and Hermione later. But, I got you something just from me too."

Harry nodded and he was passed on to Tonks. "Wotcher sexy, I like what you've done with your hair. Moody, Kingsley, and I chipped in and got you some Auror training manuals. Moody seems to think you'd make quite the Auror if that's what you decide to do after you're out of school."

Harry rolled his eyes, "I wasn't aware you were supposed to tell me the gift before I opened it."

Tonks blushed before she stuck her tongue out at him and pushed him further down the line of his well wishers. After Harry was properly greeted by the twenty guests he noticed that Dumbledore had been unable to make the party.

Molly wheeled in the cake on a small trolley of some kind as Dobby followed dutifully behind, looking far happier than Harry could remember aside from when he had just been freed from the Malfoys.

Harry was placed in a seat as Dobby snapped his fingers igniting all 15 of the candles on the cake. Of course, saying it was simply a cake would be an insult of incredible proportion. It was only one layer but the cake was big enough to have a miniature version of a Quidditch pitch and little animated figures dressed in Gryffindor scarlet robes pitted against the green and silver of Slytherin. Harry noticed with amusement that the Gryffindor seeker had messy black hair and tiny glasses as he zipped about the pitch.

Finally, the group gave him a somewhat rousing rendition of the Happy Birthday song, with the twins injecting fart sounds at rather inappropriate times based upon Molly's expression.

Harry took a deep breath and managed to blow out all of the candles in one good go, although Sirius teased him about his phenomenal lung capacity, from hours of snogging practice.

The gifts ranged from a wand servicing kit (Ron), the Auror manuals (Moody, Kingsley, and Tonks), sweets and some pranks (Ginny and the twins), to a nice dragonhide wand holster (Molly and Arthur).

Sirius gave him a certificate to a specialty wand maker and Remus gave him a very old defense text that had notes and ideas from Sirius and James doodled through it. Hermione and her parents had gotten Harry a nice set of luggage and the trip made up the rest of his gift.

As the party began to wind down Harry looked at all of his friends and family before he smiled and simply said, "Thanks a lot, this means so much to me."

Soon enough most of those assembled scattered leaving Hermione, Harry, and the elder marauders the last four present.

Remus sighed before he said, "Sirius and I have discussed this at length and we both agreed that if you wanted to we'd induct you into the ranks of the marauders."

Hermione smiled sweetly at the gesture before she turned to Harry, who surprisingly wasn't mirroring her expression as he replied, "I can't speak for Hermione, but I think I am going to decline."

Remus and Sirius shared a bewildered look and Harry raised his hand. "Please let me explain before you jump down my throat." Remus and Sirius nodded before Hermione took Harry's hand and he continued in a reverent tone, "What you two and my dad shared was a unique and special thing. It's a bond that can only come from time and sticking together. Now, no matter what happened between the two of you and my mum and dad near the end, you all remained true to each other in the end. I have that with Ron and Hermione, and I think it wouldn't be fair to anyone just for me to arbitrarily join because it was offered. Now, that's not to say that I won't carry on my heritage in my own way, but you deserve to have that friendship with my mum and dad free of me. You two and Hermione are my family; after that we'll figure it out, ok?"

Remus softly protested, "Harry, we accept you for who you are, not because your parents were our friend."

Harry smiled, "I appreciate that, but can you understand what I'm saying?"

Sirius grinned as he pulled Harry into a hug, which was joined a moment later by Hermione and Remus before he said, "Being a family is hard work pup, but I'm game for it if you are." Remus and Hermione merely nodded and Harry couldn't help but think this was easily the best gift he had been given for his birthday.

A/N: Oh that was so fluffy at the end there that I have a bit of a toothache, but fluff with the angst, right?

Next chapter we have the harmony version of the prefect scene in OOTP and Voldemort reaches out and touches Harry for a late birthday present. The Ministry will continue to splinter from within, and we'll have a quick check in with the elder Grangers before our little trip to Japan.

Thanks to all of you that have read and thanks for the reviews.

Chapter 6

Nymphadora Tonks was patiently sitting in an Order meeting on a Saturday morning, of all times, doing her best to keep her bitterness at this fact to a minimum. She was idly humming a catchy muggle tune in her head that she had caught on the alarm clock radio her father had gotten her immediately out of Hogwarts.

She supposed it was a good thing her father had always preached knowing how to live as a muggle being a muggleborn himself. As an Auror it afforded her with camouflage beyond the typical kinds such as an invisibility cloak and the disillusionment charm.

If nothing else had come from her last couple of years, she had managed to graduate Auror training, largely thanks to her abilities as a metamorphmagus and had met a man that she was rather certain she had fallen in love with. This was a whole new world for her, one she wasn't certain she was completely prepared for even in the most minute of senses.

Glancing around at her 'peers', Tonks was astounded by the sheer amount of magical talent that filled the parlor room used for Order meetings. Sitting to her right was Severus Snape, a man that had been nearly as cruel as he was brilliant in her Potions classes a few years earlier. Needless to say, being a bit clumsy in a Potions classroom had certain explosive possibilities. It had even left her in tears once, as Snape had waylaid her with a chewing out that would have squelched the career aspirations of a lesser person.

Now however, the Potions master seemed to be a transformed man. Not nearly as snide as she remembered him, she had been shocked when he actually had a compliment for both Harry and Hermione during one of the Order meetings. Surprisingly, Tonks had seen much of herself in Hermione and had taken to the muggleborn girl much like a younger sister. Therefore, Snape's compliment held that added sense of respect.

Unfortunately, this change in Snape also had led to some unnamed hostility with Dumbledore, for which any explanation had been brushed over by the older wizard when the subject was broached.

Sighing, Tonks shook her head and tried to listen intently to Dedalus Diggle's report on both the Goblins and the Ministry. Taking it as a lost cause, her eyes trailed further around the table to a few seats to her left, alighting on her cousin of sorts, one Sirius Black.

Sirius still carried around this heavy presence of guilt, for so many things that had seemingly been beyond his control. But, unlike when she had first met him a couple of months earlier, a lot of the guilt had been diverted into drive, which would put the most ambitious Slytherin to shame. She knew having Harry around had given his life some purpose, but it couldn't be the only thing to sustain him for too long. Absently she began to think of some possible matchmaking with some of her older single female coworkers at the Ministry.

The same old muggle song came back in spades as she did some extensive matchmaking in her head before she noticed Diggle had finished his report. Glancing over she saw the amusement in Remus' eyes; apparently he was well aware her mind had been drifting. Once again she was thankful her lover was such an intelligent man, because he could give her a summary later on.

Remus, ah sweet Remus, still so unsure of having a woman's touch, but for the first time he truly looked happy as opposed to content or even resigned to his existence. Harry's birthday had effected much positive change in the older but not yet old wizard's disposition. If Tonks could put a description to the change it was almost like relief mixed in with sadness. She didn't know the cause but if she had to guess, it was something to do with Harry's parents.

Other members caught her attention as the meeting continued: Kingsley, her Auror partner and a wonderful mentor to get her started in her career. Hestia, a warm woman, but not one fit for the rigors and ugliness of the war that was sure to come fully into focus soon enough. Emmeline, such a beautiful and stately woman, and she had a certain edge to her that made her demand respect without outwardly asking for it. She was not to be trifled with, in any way.

Elphias, he always held some long forgotten pain of a fallen comrade in his eyes, and she knew that this would be his last war no matter the end result. Minerva McGonagall, typically stern taskmaster, who

seemed to have a bit of a soft spot for the kids currently in the house, even if not in the meeting. She was a fair woman if nothing else.

Mad Eye seemed to have that odd ability to make her laugh even when that wasn't his intent. He was still a formidable Auror even with his stump leg, which spoke to his character as much as anything else could. Molly and Arthur could be so frustrating and endearing within the same breath. Molly was so openly emotional and mothering that it could grate on your nerves or could just as easily soothe your nerves after a long day. Arthur projected himself as a weak but principled man, when in truth the Weasley patriarch was every bit the strategic genius that Remus purported little Ron to be.

The older Weasley children really were such a contrast to their parents, and yet it was apparent who their parents were, even beyond the typical appearance comments. Bill was such a sweetheart, but he had this innate sense of magic that made him perfectly suited to be a curse breaker at Gringotts. Charlie, oh sweet Charlie was to her embarrassment a crush from her years at Hogwarts. True he was a year younger than her, but he just had a way with females. If she wasn't with Remus she might have been tempted to explore some of her more... 'Unique' talents with the second oldest Weasley son.

As she ticked down her list she realized she had impressions of every single one of them, and she could honestly say that she trusted each of them with her life to a certain extent. Well, aside from that scamp Mundungus Fletcher anyways.

Suddenly her attention was drawn from her musing as Dumbledore asked with a bemused look on his face, “Nymphadora, are you paying attention?”

Tonks blushed and stammered for an excuse when Snape muttered with a hint of distaste “Probably daydreaming about her wolf.”

Tonks barely managed to avoid an involuntary shift in her features before she mused, well maybe Snape was still a bit of a greasy git.

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"Oy Harry, the keeper for the Harpies has the same broom as me," Ron exclaimed from his comfortable sitting place in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place.

Harry glanced up from his Herbology notes tiredly. "That's good mate."

Hermione rolled her eyes at his side and asked, "Ron, haven't you already read that article before?"

Ron merely grunted as Ginny looked up from her own parchment on the essay assigned by Snape and said, "Of course he has Hermione, but it's not like that's going to stop him now, is it?"

Hermione tutted disapprovingly, but kept her end of the bargain not to nag Ron about his homework as she instead asked Harry, "How much longer do you have in you to study for the day?"

Harry rubbed at his aching neck before he glanced down at his watch. With a shrug he replied, "I'm almost done reviewing Mandrakes, so I guess after I finish that it'd be good to take a break."

"Well, ok Harry but I think we should try to get through second year in every class before we take our trip." Hermione said in a soft and not bossy tone.

Harry agreed with a nod before he asked, "Gin, why don't you ...". However, his thought was never finished as Mrs. Weasley's voice rang through the house.

"Kids, the book lists and letters are here for the year!" Like that all four popped up out of their seats, homework and Quidditch long forgotten as they sprinted from the room, thankful for some sort of reprieve from the otherwise dull existence of Grimmauld Place.

The four were joined by Fred and George at the stairs as they all ran into the dining room where Mrs. Weasley had a large stack of envelopes in hand and an amused grin on her face.

"I swear to Merlin you six have only moved so fast when trying to get some food. Has it been that boring this summer in this house?" Molly asked with a smile.

The six all gave her a look that clearly said 'Are you serious?' Molly's eyes crinkled with suppressed merriment as she said, "Right then, Harry and Hermione here are your letters." Molly handed the pair their notes, the smell of fresh parchment still engrained in the parcels.

As Molly continued to hand her own children their letters with explicit directions on what her expectations were for the coming year Hermione tore the seal from the envelope and grasped at her letters, also noticing the hard bulge of a Prefect's badge.

With a squeal she pulled the hard red and golden badge with a large P from her envelope and crushed Harry into a hug that if measured, the pressure would have been enough to kill a lesser wizard. With the hug she began to mumble mostly incomprehensible gibberish into his shoulder, but Harry did manage to catch the words 'snog' and 'silly' so he assumed it was all good news for him.

Finally she pulled away from Harry before being engulfed in a congratulatory hug by Molly, finally allowing Harry to open his own book list in relative peace. Flicking the seal away he peeled open the envelope as Hermione's excited yelps began to peter out.

Pulling out the first sheet, he nodded absently at the standard book list taking the time to check what book Umbridge had. It was a book called *Defensive Magical Theory* and it was written by Wilbert Slinkhard, Harry pondered this for a moment before he shrugged, making a mental note to worry about it later. The next sheet was a letter, and it was handwritten in a familiar elegant script.

Mr. Potter,

With the coming Quidditch season you will need to take more responsibility on your shoulders in the organization of the team. Do not worry, you have not been named captain, but it is a position you would be in line for in your sixth and seventh years.

I look forward to more Gryffindor Quidditch victory parties in the coming term.

Minerva McGonagall

Head of Gryffindor House

Harry was rather amused with the letter from McGonagall, if for no other reason than that her desire to have the Quidditch Cup was greater than any of the players on the team. He reached in to grab the last letter when he felt it; Dumbledore had made him a prefect after all. Hermione was now watching him shrewdly so he decided to play with her just a bit as he pinched the badge through the envelope and tipped the bag upside down as though to shake something loose.

Of course when nothing came out the look on Hermione's face betrayed the disappointment she felt that Harry wouldn't be there to enjoy the honor with her. Deciding to spare her any more misery he lessened the pressure he had on the badge and it slipped out of the bag. Hermione's eyes lit up, but almost immediately she realized Harry had her out and she sniffed once to feign disinterest before finally launching herself at him again and pulling him into her vice like hug.

Molly and the others congratulated Harry genuinely on the honor, although the twins were more teasing than congratulating. Harry was pleasantly surprised to see Ron's face free of any bitterness or jealousy of being passed over, and he made a note to work with his friend even longer to get him up to speed as the starting keeper for the Quidditch team.

Mrs. Weasley broke up the twins teasing of the perfect prefects when she said, "Well you know we'll have to celebrate this, don't you?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah I reckon Remus and Sirius will be right chuffed about the both of us getting badges."

Hermione's eyes widened, "Oh dear, Harry can Hedwig take a letter to my mum and dad for me?"

"Of course she will, Hedwig always has been willing to send out your post or pick it up. Rather strange really, but she's a right smart owl so she knows when she is needed," Harry pointed out with a hint of pride.

Ron sighed, "Better than Pig at any rate. Bloody bird is a menace I swear."

Harry laughed dryly, "Oh yes, I'm sure Hedwig would be thrilled at that comparison."

Hermione and Ginny made eye contact and rolled their eyes before the older witch disappeared up the stairs to write her parents a letter, despite the fact she would be seeing them in a couple of days, her book list and badge firmly grasped in hand.

Ron sighed again, which seemed to be a rather permanent thing in the stifling environment of Grimmauld Place. "You do realize that it'll be your job to let everyone get away with stuff that Hermione won't let us get away with. Muggles have something like it; Hermione told me it was good cup bad cup. Don't rightly know what a cup has to do with it, but she has always been rather barmy."

Harry merely gave Ron a rueful look before he chuckled lightly after a long moment in an action so delayed it seemed rather inappropriate. Ron patted his friend on the shoulder condescendingly, "That's alright mate, as long as you got it in the end."

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It was just before dinner when Harry next saw Hermione, but she still had that radiant glow that she would get when acing an exam or getting a spell right on the first try.

She smiled at him and leaned in at the dinner table before she whispered, "I told Hedwig to drop it off at the international owl office, because even as great as she is I doubt a trip to Japan is on her list of things to do."

Harry nodded as he glanced around the dining room. A large banner was hanging over the eve into the kitchen that was spelled to say:

### *Congratulations Harry and Hermione, Gryffindor Prefects*

Remus and Sirius had been very happy for him when he had told them an hour earlier, and Remus even promised to share some stories he had of being a prefect with Lily back in their Hogwarts days. That had made Harry very happy when his prefectship could be framed in such an advantageous light.

Arthur had just come from the Ministry using some of the single destination Floo powder specifically for Grimmauld Place. As he removed his work robe he glanced into the dining room before his eyes focused on the large red and gold banner.

With a wide smile he said, "Ah well done you two. I assumed the book lists and school letters would be coming soon, but you know how tight lipped Albus is about that stuff."

Harry had to stifle a grin at this statement; he had been well aware of the coming letters for over a week. Perhaps he wasn't as far down on Dumbledore's list of confidence as he had thought.

Finally he replied, "Hermione and I are just glad we got everything before we had to leave. According to Sirius, we'll only be allowed to make a couple of stops that morning before the Express takes off, so Remus volunteered to pick up our lists for us while we're gone."

Arthur nodded, "Yes, nasty business being forced to live like this. But, I suppose the important thing is that we do indeed keep living."

Harry shrugged, while he understood mortality and its trappings, he didn't like to discuss it in a casual conversation at a dinner table. Arthur cottoned on to his faux pas and merely changed the topic, "So Hermione, tell me what kind of attractions you and Harry will be visiting on your little vacation."

As Hermione promptly began to give Mr. Weasley an in depth description of the various landmarks they would be visiting over their nine day visit in Japan, Harry's scar did something it hadn't in a little while - it flashed with a fleeting second of white hot pain. Instinctively, Harry raised his Occlumency shields to full bore, bringing the sensation of the scar down to a muted throb. Perhaps most

interesting was the strange overlay of emotions that he clearly recognized as alien and not his own.

Harry could recognize the muted emotions as anxiety mixed in with seething rage. Now the truly scary question was, how did Voldemort manage to get inside of his head like this?

The second party in Grimmauld in less than a week was a much more subdued affair, largely due to the pained expression on one of the guests of honor's face. Harry grew less talkative as the night progressed, the persistent throbbing slowly taking its toll on him.

Finally, as though snapped out of a trance Sirius asked, "Are you ok kiddo?"

Harry rubbed his angrily pulsing scar to show how not ok he was before Hermione leaned over and brushed the scar gently with the back of her hand. While the scar still ached, the touch seemed to soothe the worst of the effects, a fact which relieved Harry greatly.

Sirius shared a glance with Remus before he said, "I'm going to make a Floo call to Dumbledore; he has to know something about why Harry's scar acts up like that."

Harry managed a pained looking nod to muster his own agreement to Sirius' next plan of action. Hermione had by this time shifted so her legs were in Harry's lap as she gently massaged his entire head, taking care to caress his scar every so often.

Glancing around she worried her bottom lip between her teeth, as she continued her ministrations while trying to ponder the possible explanations for what exactly Harry's scar was.

Sirius and Remus returned not five minutes later, looking a little relieved but still concerned about Harry's condition. Remus ran a tired hand through his hair. "Dumbledore informed us that the connection you shared with Tom before will be strengthened and expanded as he regains full use of his magic and body."

Harry sagged in his chair before he said, "The Occlumency helps, trust me. It makes the pain and emotions a lot less intense."

Remus cleared his throat awkwardly sharing a sideways glance with Sirius. “Emotions?”

Harry nodded, frankly too pained to worry about anything else at the moment. “Yeah, Voldemort is anxious and in a terrible rage about something right now.”

Arthur softly offered, “Well he would be. Someone trying to get into the Department of Mysteries under the Imperius was stopped today. It’s rather obvious he looking for the p-.”

Harry was once again harshly reminded of the prophecy and its contents, and the fact that no one else aside from Dumbledore realized its implications suddenly made him feel very alone. Reaching up to grasp Hermione's hand between his own he mumbled, "I think I'm going to go to bed."

Looking directly into Hermione's eyes Harry quietly asked, "Will you help me pack tomorrow for the trip?"

Hermione blinked, with Harry's eyes boring into her own before she nodded and asked, "Are you sure you'll be ok tonight?"

Harry shrugged slightly. “The pain and the emotions are the worst of the bit, so I’ll make sure to take a vial of pain numbing potion before I go to bed. I’ll be fine, I promise Hermione.”

Hermione sighed looking slightly put out that she couldn't do more for Harry, but she nodded and gave him a quick peck on the lips. Even the twins couldn't begrudge Harry that, which seemed it was the least he could be allowed for having Voldemort prowl about in his head.

[illegible]

It had become his little place of solitude, this balcony that didn't appear to connect to any specific room from the outside. It was raining outside again, but tonight Harry wanted the comfort of the rain to wash away this taint that was inextricably tied to his very own being.

He knew he should tell Hermione and Ron the prophecy; after all they had the right to turn back now and save themselves, although he was rather certain they wouldn't. He would have an excellent chance to tell Hermione; maybe he could even do it on the plane ride to Japan. Knowing Hermione, she had suspected something like this for a long time, but he still couldn't get past that block in his mind that told him he had done the same long ago also.

That was the big difference between suspecting something and knowing something though - an abstract reality was much easier to suppress than the actual thing.

A clap of thunder sounded in the distance, signaling the approach of lightning. Not that it bothered Harry, considering magic and electricity preferred to remain separate. A house under the *Fidelius* was no more likely to be struck by lightning than a giant block of rubber was.

Shaking his head, soaked in water, Harry tried to move his mind to a much happier place as he thought about his nine day vacation in anonymity. His hair had grown a bit longer over the summer, his scar was easily concealed by his bangs and with the new glasses he had gotten from Madam Pomfrey of all people as a belated birthday present he really could probably go unnoticed in an unknown land like Japan.

That was such a lovely thought that he couldn't help a small grin that covered his face as a bolt of lightning illuminated the sky, striking down less than five miles away. It was an illusion, fleeting and finite, but he could do with a bit of being a normal bloke with a beautiful and brilliant girlfriend free of the constraints of fame and prophecy for a little while.

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Meanwhile, in Little Hangleton the man once known as Tom Marvolo Riddle was still in a rage after his repeated failure to begin floating the vision of the Hall of Prophecies to Potter. The boy's mind was completely closed to him now, and despite the relative success of the muggleborn murders he knew it really had little actual impact on his true objectives: namely, destroying Potter and Dumbledore so that he

could make his actual ascension to the leadership of the wizarding world.

“Avery, how goes the search for blueprints to Azkaban?” Voldemort sneered contemptuously to his most trusted free Death Eater.

Avery bowed, trembling slightly, his master’s repeated use of the Cruciatus curse on him slowly having its effect as he replied, “Lucius has nearly traversed the final backchannel to procure a copy of the blueprints my lord.”

Voldemort watched the man tremble before him and could notice the man’s trembling, less a show of fear and more of strain. He suddenly realized he would have to hold back on the torture of his followers and use his anger on those that actually deserved it. “Very well, I expect to have a copy soon so that my most faithful can be rewarded for their allegiance with freedom.”

Avery nodded and slowly walked away, thanking the gods that his master hadn’t punished him for his less than perfect news.

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Hermione had slept sparingly the previous night. Her worry for Harry and guilt that she couldn’t help him wasn’t allowing her any more than the two hours of sleep she was certain Harry would have loved to have had.

However, instead of worrying any more than she already was, Hermione decided she would carry on and treat it like every other day. She would help Harry pack, tease him about his taste in clothes, take the day off from OWL review, and snog her boyfriend into a good mood before their flight to Japan.

After taking a slightly longer than normal shower (she had been growing her hair out and it took longer to wash and dry as a result), Hermione dressed plainly, saving her favorite outfits for the trip as she had been packed for a few days already.

Instead of going downstairs for breakfast she walked past the stairway and down the corridor to Harry’s room. The hallway was

always rather dark simply due to the lighting in the house, but today the darkness seemed to almost drain her of some small measure of her vitality. She truly didn't want to see what Harry looked like after a night of having that monster in his head; she knew that it would destroy many average witches and wizards.

With a sigh she pushed the partially open door aside and entered Harry's room to find him curled up in his bed. His body looked rather relaxed so she released a sigh of relief as she gently roused him awake by shaking his shoulder.

Harry mumbled sleepily, "Mmm too tired."

Hermione smiled and moved her hand to his face brushing his bangs away from his forehead, which was met with Harry squirming away by rolling onto his side.

Hermione giggled softly, amazed Harry could even sleep when he was in as much pain as she was certain he had been the previous night. She had known for quite some time that Harry had an unusually high pain threshold.

Crawling onto the bed, a wicked grin crossed her face as she tugged on Harry until she was straddled across his stomach. Harry's arm feebly covered his eyes in an attempt to ignore the presence depriving him of sleep. Hermione raised both of her hands in a warning before they shot down and began to tickle Harry's side ruthlessly.

Harry's eyes snapped open and in one fluid motion he rolled over to the side pinning Hermione beneath him. Her eyes went wide when she felt the typical male response of early morning press against her thigh and she squirmed wiggled a little, enjoying the look on Harry's face.

He groaned and rolled off. "You always have the upper hand don't you?"

Hermione giggled as she daintily smoothed her jumper as she propped her elbow up and watched him from her side. "Don't feel bad Harry, it's not just you. It tends to be along gender lines. So as soon

as you were born with that lovely little bit, well the deck was stacked against you even before the first time we met.

Harry rolled onto his side opposite of Hermione and smiled sleepily. "I like sitting this close to you; I can see your face without needing my glasses."

Hermione smiled. "As much as I enjoy it, I was just coming to see if you were feeling all right after last night."

Harry nodded slightly. "I only got about four hours of sleep, but after Voldemort realized it was a bad job he closed our connection back up."

Hermione sighed in relief before she said, "You really scared the Weasleys last night Harry. I mean Ron knew you got visions, but I don't think he realized just how much your scar affects you."

Harry frowned. "Ginny should know what it's like to have the bugger in her head."

Hermione looked conflicted for a moment before she replied, "Harry, I don't know if Ginny ever told you, but she barely remembers anything from her time with the diary. She has these indistinct feelings of pain, but most of that year is a blank. Why else do you think she seemingly appeared out of the blue this past year?"

Harry blinked and sheepishly replied, "I guess I never really noticed."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Once the impression of Riddle was destroyed she still had the memories stored in her short term memory. But, as time has passed the memories were lost because they weren't really hers. I mean she can't speak Parseltongue anymore, so everything else from Riddle would fade too. But, because of everything being blank she had to catch up on all of her first year material and it took all of her second and third years to be completely caught up."

Harry nodded and covered his yawn, sparing Hermione the worst of his morning breath before he sat up. "Let me get a shower, and then

we can do all of my packing. That should get us to lunch without any big problems.”

Hermione nodded as she watched Harry walk into the bathroom with a clean pair of boxers and a towel in hand. Fifteen minutes later Harry returned to find Hermione packing him the clothes she wanted him to wear on the trip, and a few of his personal books that she hadn't read yet.

Harry eyed her warily as he grabbed a pair of shorts he had worn a couple of days ago and a clean t-shirt from his dresser. Finally he cleared his throat and asked, "I thought we were going to be packing, not just you?"

Hermione blinked, finally realizing that Harry was talking to her as she blushed. "Oh, I'm sorry Harry, I thought I'd do it for you as a surprise."

Harry chuckled. "Alright then, so what else do you want to waste time doing before lunch?"

Hermione arched her eyebrow and coyly replied, “I can think of something I’d like to do.”

Harry grinned. "Yeah?"

Hermione nodded as she said, "Yes, you can tell me why Voldemort is after something in the Department of Mysteries."

Harry deflated all of the wonderful possibilities swirling in his mind quickly as he resignedly replied, "Ok, but you have to promise to let me finish my explanation before asking any questions."

Hermione nodded as she offered, "Why don't we do this in the library?"

Harry sighed and pulled his wand from his pocket, flicking it once to close the lid of his suitcase.

[illegible]

An hour later Hermione was sobbing into Harry's chest as the implications of what he said had began to sink in. It wasn't the fact that the prophecy existed and that Harry was the one named; she had expected the end result for quite some time. No, it was the fact that Harry never really had gotten a break in his life, and now with the added weight of the prophecy on his shoulders he wouldn't until it was fulfilled.

That was the tricky thing about prophecies; they had no real magical importance if those mentioned in the prophecy chose to ignore them. But she knew that Voldemort was insane, paranoid, and egotistical enough to force the prophecy to be fulfilled.

Finally she pulled away, her eyes red and puffy, before she said, "You can do it Harry, but you can't do it all at once. I'll help you, Remus and Sirius will help you, and Dumbledore will help you."

Harry merely sighed. "I'll tell Ron soon enough, but I think I'll hold off on telling anyone else."

Hermione sniffed. "But what about Remus and Sirius, Harry?"

Harry's expression became strained. "I-I can't tell them yet. They'll die to save me if I did. They'll leave me just like Mum and Dad did."

Hermione nodded her understanding; even though she wanted to tell him that she would do the same and that Remus and Sirius already were in danger she could see his need to keep any family he still had safe and wouldn't bring it up now. Finally she said, "I must look like a mess, let me clean up and then we can go down and get some lunch."

[illegible]

Harry was down in the dining room waiting for lunch with the Weasleys. Remus and Sirius were out on some sort of Order business and wouldn't be back until later, so Harry was sitting in an awkward silence over the events of last night praying for Hermione to arrive soon.

Thankfully, Ron just came out with it after Harry avoided everyone's eyes for a couple of minutes. "Harry, can you feel You-Know-Who's emotions?" Ron asked tentatively, at least for his standards.

Harry sighed. "I can if he really wants me to. Last night was the worst ever, and even then he had to stop forcing the link because he was getting exhausted."

Molly looked blankly at Harry for a moment. "He was exhausted? Harry, are you saying that you were able to outlast You-Know-Who?"

Harry shrugged. "He was the one using all of his energy to open the link, so all I had to do was raise my Occlumency shields and wait him out with my headache."

Ginny appeared extremely flustered and meekly asked, "Was he trying to possess you?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I think he was trying to force something into my head. When it didn't work he threw a tantrum and forced the link open as wide as he could just to cause me some pain."

Ron sighed heavily and just as they heard Hermione coming down the stairs he said, "You're scary Harry, you know that right?"

Harry laughed at Ron's blunt statement. "That's what we've been telling you at the dinner table the past few years Ron."

A/N: Next chapter we have the short trip to Heathrow and a flight to Japan. Voldemort will make another appearance and something will happen to shift the balance of power in the Ministry.

Thanks to all of you that have read and thanks for all of the reviews.

Question of the chapter:

Based upon the cover art that was released for Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows a couple of days ago, are you more excited for its release or less?

Chapter 7

“Oh Harry I just know we’re going to have a wonderful time with Mum and Dad. Their dental conference coincided with a large religious gathering near Kyoto. Professor Dumbledore told me to be prepared for Japanese hospitality, so I wonder what he meant by that?” Hermione babbled happily from her comfortable seat in the Business Class of the non-stop flight from London to Osaka.

Harry’s lips quirked upwards at his girlfriend’s excitement as he gazed out of his window seat to see the ground passing through the broken cloud cover below. It was amazing having such a perspective on the world Harry realized, it suddenly made the heights he reached on his broom, save one time, seem rather pedestrian.

Hermione nudged his shoulder, giving him a small pout. “Are you even listening Harry?”

Harry reached across the armrest and took one of her small hands in his own. “I am, but I was just thinking about how high we are and comparing it to how high I get in the Quidditch matches. I think I was about a half a mile up when the dementors forced me off of my broom. We must be what ten times that height, and how much faster are we going?”

Hermione gave Harry a knowing smile. “You talk about flying like I talk about books.”

Harry quirked an amused eyebrow and replied, “Well at least I don’t sleep with my Firebolt, Ms. Granger.”

Hermione blushed prettily but tried to regain the upper hand. “Yes well I’m sure you do enough broomstick servicing in your bed to make up for that.”

Harry chuckled. “That was desperate Hermione, but I’ll give it to you.” Hermione stuck her tongue out and they shared a light laugh before the flight attendant came by and offered them a glass of orange juice, which they both accepted graciously.

Nearly two hours later they were somewhere over far Eastern Europe when Hermione finally gave Harry the outline of her itinerary for the trip.

“I think we’ll be spending most of our time in Kyoto Harry, but we do have a couple of day trips planned. Dad seems to think you and he need to golf with Dr. Fujiyama, he’s an oral surgeon my mum and dad sometimes refer patients to. Apparently, he was here for the conference also, but he has some family in the area that own a golf course. His son David will be joining you three also; I guess a sort of father son match.” Hermione explained as she read her rough outline.

For some reason the lightness of Hermione's statement hit him much more bluntly than normal as he allowed himself a brief foray into the what if world of father-son Quidditch matches that he missed out on with his own father. Hermione merely gave him a warm smile when she ferreted out his musings and squeezed his hand briefly before continuing. "Mum wanted to visit Mt. Fuji, so that will be a full day trip also. I think she mentioned something about hiking part way up for a spot of exercise and sightseeing."

Harry nodded. "I'd like to see that. I haven't really seen much in the way of actual mountains you know."

Hermione nodded. “There is also a magical school in Nara, the largest in all of Japan actually. But, since the Japanese go year round in school, we should have the chance to maybe sit in on a class if we contact the school in advance. A couple of simple translating spells and we can keep right up and maybe even learn some new strain of oriental magic.”

Harry had actually taken the time to research some of the regional differences in magic over the course of the past few days, and he had found that Japanese magical theory was similar to the Celtic/Druid derivative that was currently taught at Hogwarts. But, the Japanese were much more openly demonstrative towards their religious leanings within the classroom, Harry was certain that if he and Hermione visited they would pick up some Buddhist and even some Taoist theory.

[illegible]

Neville Longbottom sighed heavily as he pruned various magical plants in his small ancestral greenhouse. The summer had been even more boring than he had initially expected; he had only received two letters from Ginny over the entire time – one detailing that she would be in an unplotable location for the summer and the other detailing how much she missed him and wanted to give him a big kiss when she saw him again.

Of course that letter had put him in the best mood he had been in the entire summer, but even the promise of a kiss from his girlfriend of sorts didn't help with this boredom. He had finished the summer homework weeks ago, and he decided against OWL revision until he could talk to a real expert, one Hermione Granger.

Putting down his pruning shears, Neville picked up his watering bucket and began to make the rounds once again. However, just as he finished watering his new prized plant his gran called out, "Neville dear, we're leaving to do your school shopping in Diagon Alley. Finish up with your little plants and then we can go."

Neville nodded and he began to think of the one thing he wanted the most, a new wand that would match him better. He imagined if he played just the right tune with his gran she would cave and take him to Ollivander's. It wasn't that he didn't cherish his father's wand, but it just wasn't a good match for him and his grades had suffered for it in the past. Being an OWL year Neville needed to do this right if he wanted any chance of being a Professional Herbologist. With a glance around at the variety of magical plants in his greenhouse he briefly totaled their value as potions ingredients somewhere over one thousand galleons.

After taking care of his supplies Neville activated the special stasis charms that kept the plants from dying when he was away at Hogwarts.

Perhaps the biggest worry of Neville's had been the lack of a letter from Harry; after all the past school year had led to what he considered his first real friendship. Harry had always defended him, but now it was almost like Neville was trusted to do the same for him, which was a task in its own right.

Neville ran down the stairs with his booklist in hand, nearly skidding into his gran down by their Floo connection. She smiled at the rare energetic showing from her grandson before her normally stern visage slipped back on. "You have your booklist?"

Neville nodded. "I think I just need my books, some new robes, and there was one other thing."

Augusta Longbottom nodded stiffly, grabbed a pinch of Floo powder and stepped into the connection before she uttered her destination and vanished into the emerald flames.

Neville followed soon after and managed to avoid a total face plant thanks to some frantic scrambling, and he heard some girls giggle at his plight before he could right himself. Standing up with his face flaming he brushed the Floo soot off of his shoulder and spotted his gran a few feet away with an amused look on her face.

She frowned slightly. "What was the other thing you needed, Neville?"

Neville sighed. "I was hoping I could get a wand that works properly, gran. I love Dad's old wand, but my grades in the practical parts of class are terrible because the wand is so poorly matched to me. Seeing as how this year is my OWL year, I figured now would be the last real chance I have to get good enough grades to be a professional Herbologist."

Augusta blinked trying to assimilate this new assertive Neville with the one she had sent off to Hogwarts the past September. Finally she nodded. "Of course dear, why don't we stop there after we do some banking."

Neville gave her a relieved smile before he followed dutifully behind as they left the Leaky Cauldron and made their way out onto Diagon Alley.

The trip to Gringotts was short and sweet. Fortunately, the Longbottoms were a rather affluent family and the goblins always looked kindly upon affluent customers, normally having cash on hand to save them the trip down to their vault.

So here they were, outside of Ollivander's shop, a place they should have been five years earlier, as Augusta Longbottom led the last real hope of making the Longbottom family something aside from a dying line into the old and dusty shop.

The old man walked around a large stack of boxes and he smiled. "Ah Augusta Longbottom, I expected to see you a few years ago, but better late than never I suppose. What was it again, 13 inches of oak with an augury feather for the core? A rather stiff blend if I remember correctly."

Augusta merely nodded as she pulled her wand out of the sleeve of her robes. Finally she said, "I am here to get Neville his first personal wand. He has been using his father's wand the past few years."

Ollivander nodded. "Very well, young man step up here so I can get your measurements. Right handed I presume?" Neville nodded as he cautiously approached the older wizard.

With a snap of the older wizard's finger a measuring tape unfurled and magically measured his right wand arm before it furled up and returned to the box it had been placed in. Ollivander nodded thoughtfully and returned with a small stack of boxes. He pulled the first one from its box and handed it Neville, "Go on lad give it a flick."

Neville flicked the wand and a blast of hot air streamed from the wand blowing a stack of boxes over in a far corner. Ollivander smiled at Neville's sheepish expression. "No that wasn't the one."

Pulling a wand from another box he motioned with his hand. Neville flicked the wand and a swarm of bees came buzzing from the wand. Ollivander gestured with his hand and the bees were vanished. He looked down at the remaining boxes. "The wood is all wrong for you young man. I think we need something older, and perhaps a more powerful focus agent for the core."

Neville looked blankly at him as he thought with no small measure of excitement, *something more powerful!*

Ollivander walked into the back of his shop and Neville chanced a look at his gran, for the first time in his memory she was beaming at

him with pride. It filled Neville with some vague warmth he had always longed for.

Ollivander came back with two dusty looking boxes. Opening the first he said, "Try this young man, one of two Yew wands of its kind. The wood is from a particularly powerful magical area near Stonehenge."

Neville grabbed the wand and before he could flick it he felt a tremendous power wash over him. The old wizard nodded excitedly. "Oh my, I do believe we have found your wand Mr. Longbottom. Only a powerful wizard could elicit such a powerful response from that combination. Ten and a half inches of yew wood, with a Griffin feather as its core. It's rather curious that now I have cleansed my shop of the final connection to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's own wand. You share the same wand wood Mr. Longbottom. While not as intimate a connection as say the same cores, you will find a very unique relationship should occur if you ever cross wands. Something which I would suggest you avoid at all costs, but fascinating nonetheless. I believe you are destined for many great things."

Neville nodded with his heart in his throat. He had hoped for a wand, but to share wand wood with Voldemort, well that was terrifying and exhilarating in one breath.

After his gran paid for the wand she grasped Neville's shoulder and he followed behind her obediently, his wand safely ensconced in his pocket. The rest of the trip would be a vast disappointment in comparison.

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Meanwhile a few miles away in downtown London, a pale haired man was handing over a sack of money in exchange for a set of blueprints.

He glanced at the man and tapped his left forearm before he said, "The Dark Lord will reward you when the time is right comrade. For now remain as you have been, and I will call to you for our next intelligence gathering."

With nary a glance back Lucius Malfoy left the office, the words outside of the door labeling it as:

Ministry Clerical Information.

Lord Voldemort was about to get some very good news.

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Harry glanced around in the large Karaoke/Sushi bar in rapt attention. True, the four Brits stood out in the place like a sore thumb, but they were too busy taking everything in to pay it any matter.

Michael grinned at the awed look on his daughter's and Harry's faces. They had seen more magnificent things in their lives but little new things like this still caught their attention. It made him feel slightly less inadequate as a parent that he could still see that look on his daughter's face.

Bianca spoke first. “Well you already told us about the trip, so why don’t you tell us about how the summer is going. We know you both were named prefects, which is exactly why we are treating you here. This is apparently the best sushi bar in the area and Michael promised me one karaoke song before we left. So imagine it as killing two birds with one stone.”

Hermione's eyes took on a calculating gleam as she turned to Harry. "You'll do a song for me too, won't you Harry?"

Harry sighed. He could play this one of two ways, but he figured it wouldn't hurt to have a huge favor on his tally for the rest of the trip in case he found something he wanted her to do for him. He grinned and said, "I'll be right back, I need to see if they can do my song."

Michael waved his hand. "Harry, just about any song you want they'll have on that thing, trust me on that."

Harry nodded, a small grin on his face as he remembered his Aunt Petunia's obsession with Sting and the Police. It seemed rare where he could turn something from the Dursleys into a positive, but he figured this was one of those times.

Soon the sushi was served and Bianca said, “The conference was rather boring, but we use them as an excuse to vacation every

summer. I'm sure you recall that we were in France a couple of summers ago Harry. Well, the conference was in Paris and then we went to the French coast for a couple of weeks."

Harry grinned as he took a bite of his sushi roll. Things like fish had remained a mystery to him his entire life and he realized he rather liked this. Swallowing his bite he took a small sip from the lemonade he ordered before he asked, "So how do you get up there to sing a song?"

Michael chuckled as Bianca grinned at Hermione. "Patience lad, enjoy your sushi and rice. We have plenty of time to make fools of ourselves and still have a full stomach while we're at it."

Harry grinned sheepishly as conversation drifted to and fro for the remainder of the meal, everyone enjoying the company they kept.

Finally, Michael polished off the last of his food and he turned to Harry. "Let me show you how you get in line to sing. Then I'll show you how to make the request. What song did you have in mind?"

Harry leaned in and whispered into Michael's ear. The older man laughed. "Aye that should be perfect, if Hermione is anything like her mother anyways."

Michael made the requests and he was told that he and Harry were the next two in line to sing. When the previous man finished a rather butchered rendition of Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*, Michael took the stage and spoke into the microphone. "This song is dedicated to my beautiful wife Bianca. We've been married for nearly 20 years and baby you're still the best. Carly Simon sends her regards for you love." With this he broke out into song.

***Nobody does it better
Makes me feel sad for the rest
Nobody does it half as good as you
Baby, you're the best***

Harry grinned as he watched the crowd get into Michael's performance. Glancing over at Hermione and her mum he laughed as they swayed to the music, like they were at a rock concert. In a way it

reminded of the fast dances he shared with her at the Yule Ball and he was once again reminded of how perfect his own choice was.

*I wasn't lookin', but somehow you found me
I tried to hide from your love light
But like heaven above me
The spy who loved me
Is keeping all my secrets safe tonight*

*And nobody does it better
Though sometimes I wish someone could
Nobody does it quite the way you do
Why'd you have to be so good?*

Michael was truly feeling it at this point and gave a small pelvic thrust, which prompted several dainty giggles while Bianca faked fainting as Hermione laughed, only somewhat mortified, and fanned some air on her.

*The way that you hold me
Whenever you hold me
There's some kind of magic inside you
That keeps me from runnin'
But just keep it comin'
How'd you learn to do the things you do?*

*And nobody does it better
Makes me feel sad for the rest
Nobody does it half as good as you
Baby, baby
Darling, you're the best
Baby, you're the best
Baby, you're the best*

Michael dabbed his brow as the crowd broke out into polite applause before he said, "Next up is my little girl's boyfriend. Everyone give him a hand, unless he is really terrible, then you can boo him."

Harry walked out on to the stage, the glare from the lights in front of the stage forcing him to take a moment to acclimate to the light. Harry unscrewed the microphone from the stand and said, "This one is for

Hermione, it's been magic since the first time we met. Thanks to The Police I can tell her that every little thing she does is magic."

The music kicked up and Harry began:

*Though I've tried before to tell her
Of the feelings I have for her in my heart
Every time that I come near her
I just lose my nerve
As I've done from the start*

*Every little thing she does is magic
Everything she do just turns me on
Even though my life before was tragic
Now I know my love for her goes on*

Hermione was on her feet at this point cheering wildly along with Michael and Bianca, and a group of Japanese school girls that were giggling wildly as they danced about. Harry grinned at the crowd before he took a deep breath and continued.

*Do I have to tell the story
Of a thousand rainy days since we first met
It's a big enough umbrella
But it's always me that ends up getting wet*

*Every little thing she does is magic
Everything she do just turns me on
Even though my life before was tragic
Now I know my love for her goes on*

Harry took some slack from the microphone and hopped down off of the stage to serenade Hermione in front of the entire crowd.

*I resolve to call her up a thousand times a day
And ask her if she'll marry me in some old fashioned way
But my silent fears have gripped me
Long before I reach the phone
Long before my tongue has tripped me
Must I always be alone?*

***Every little thing she does is magic
Everything she do just turns me on
Even though my life before was tragic
Now I know my love for her goes on***

***Every little thing she does is magic
Everything she do just turns me on
Even though my life before was tragic
Now I know my love for her goes on***

Harry walked back up the steps to the stage and screwed the microphone back onto the stand. The entire crowd remained standing and applauded him right off of the stage.

Finally she broke the kiss and quickly asked, “That was brilliant, but how did you know the song so well? You didn’t even look at the screen once.”

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it, not worrying about Harry's comment; instead she was intent on making it as enjoyable as she could for him during his time away on vacation.

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Meanwhile the inhabitants of Grimmauld Place continued to trudge onward through the nearly crippling boredom of day to day life under house arrest.

“Ginny, Tonks has some post for me and I think it’s a letter from Lavender. I need a girl to translate it for me so I don’t look like a git.” Ron begged his younger sister without any sign of either pride or ego.

Ginny thought long and hard before she said, “Ok, but I expect you to buy me some Bertie Bott’s on the Express as payment.”

Ron nodded as he handed the letter to Ginny as if it was a ticking time bomb, not that he knew what one of those was. Ginny unfurled the letter and read it slowly and carefully, smiling at parts and frowning thoughtfully at other parts, each change of expression succeeding in driving Ron further up the figurative wall.

Finally she rolled the letter back up and said, “Well, from the sounds of things she is interested. But, you have to make the first move, and it has to be something very public as a show of your intentions. Perhaps you could ask her to the first Hogsmeade weekend in the middle of the common room.”

Ron paled at the suggestion and he sputtered, “You mean in front of the whole house?”

Ginny sighed. “Ron, I don’t see what the big deal is. This letter pretty much guarantees she’ll say yes if you ask her. Anyways wouldn’t you look better if you have the confidence to ask her in public?”

Ron sighed in defeat. “Well yeah, but...what if all I manage to do is look like such a big git she decides to say no?”

Ginny smiled in understanding, no teasing at all in her voice as she said, “Ron, you have to have confidence in yourself. If you always believe you’re going to fail then that is exactly what you’ll do.”

Ron nodded absently as Ginny handed him the letter and walked out of the room. His mind was racing with ways of acting cool and confident when he asked Lavender out, this was what he wanted after all, wasn’t it?

Hermione leaned closer and whispered seductively, "So tell me Harry, if I was a snitch would you catch me?" She began to unbutton the blouse that usually remained hidden under her Hogwarts uniform one by one.

Hermione leaned in again and Harry grinned almost giddily as he turned his ear to her soft lips and she opened her mouth to say, "Harry! Time to wake up!"

Harry blinked as he felt a hand on his shoulder, slowly he opened his eyes, oh it was way too bright, but he was just...dreaming...damn. Harry groaned as a small pair of hands gave him his glasses and the world began to shift into focus, not nearly as good as his dreams had been a moment earlier. He shifted in bed, the sticky warmth the only clue as to where his unconscious mind had wandered the night before.

Suddenly he realized that Hermione was eyeing him critically as she asked, “Are you ok Harry?”

Harry blinked and blushed furiously as he squeaked out, “Oh fine, just thinking about having a lie in is all.”

Hermione's eyes narrowed and then widened as a faint blush covered her cheeks as the pieces of evidence slid into place. She had a small smile dancing on her lips as she said, "No lie in for you today Mr. Potter. Get your shower; we are going to the magical school in Nara. Some Japanese Ministry workers invited the two of us to observe an ancient ritual in regards to dead family members, or something like that. I'm afraid they were rather vague on details."

Harry had climbed to the edge of his bed and without making eye contact he said, "Ok, well let me get out of bed, I should be ready to go in about twenty minutes."

Harry grimaced and did a quick wandless cleaning charm before he made his bed and grabbed the set of clothes Hermione designated as day #2 with a small slip of paper.

After a quick shower Harry noticed with no small amusement that his outfit matched the one Hermione had been wearing a few minutes earlier. Brushing his teeth carefully Harry finished up in the bathroom just in time to catch Hermione, who appeared ready to hex his hair off for taking so long.

She blinked when he opened the door before she could knock on it and she gave him an appraising look before she nodded. "Good, you like nice by the way. A pair of Japanese Ministry officials are supposed to be coming in about ten minutes and we're leaving by portkey to the school. Now, don't be surprised if there is a lot of finger pointing and whispering, because they have been informed that Harry Potter is coming."

Harry's eyes widened. "But, that's sure to get back to Voldemort, isn't it?"

Hermione sighed. "I thought the same, but apparently the Japanese have some sort of secrecy charms tied into the wards of the school. They could tell eventually, but we'll be back in Hogwarts before that ever happens."

Harry nodded slowly as Hermione took him by the hand and led him out to the small living area in the large suite the four Brits shared. Michael and Bianca were sitting together at the small table in the kitchenette reading a day old copy of the *Times* when the teens walked in. Michael smiled and said, "Hey Harry, a bit of the jet lag reach up and grab you?"

Harry nodded absently, stifling a yawn before he said, "Something like that. So what plans have you today?"

Bianca replied, "We were thinking of just taking a walk through the city. I hear there are some lovely places for couples to go in the city. Hermione tells us you two are observing some sort of a magical ritual to see dead family members."

Harry blinked, as a fleeting thought of seeing his parents again like he had in the graveyard crept into his consciousness. However, with that thought came the likelihood that he would just be picking at a sore that was slowly healing on its own already. Finally, he decided just to

leave it be as Hermione explained some basics of the ritual and how it coincided with the muggle Shinto festival of the same name.

It seemed to be only a moment later as Harry was lost in thought when the swishing sound of a portkey deposited two elderly looking Japanese men into the middle of the room. Harry also didn't notice his wand hand reflexively going to the hilt of his wand, prepared for the worst as his mind had continued to wander on his idle depressing thoughts.

The two men walked over to Harry and Hermione, and one of them spoke with the garbled eloquence of a translating charm, Hello, Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger, we are here to escort you to the Nara School of Magic. We are honored at both of your presences here in Japan, and Albus Dumbledore san has made us aware of any potential dangers. Do not worry, it has been five hundred years since any dark lord has set foot on our sacred soil."

Harry nodded absently, glancing back at Hermione, who looked more like she was puzzling out some trifle of Japanese history than actually worried. Harry made a mental note to keep her on her toes more in the future as the other man pulled a stuffed dragon of some sort and motioned with his hand for the two of them to grab hold. As they placed their hands on the stuffed animal they all disappeared with nary a sound aside from a soft pop.

The portkey deposited the quartet in the middle of a quaint courtyard and thanks to their animagus forms the different style of landing didn't throw Harry and Hermione for too much of a loop. Hermione excitedly turned to Harry. "Did you see Harry? Their portkeys are entirely different from the ones we use at home."

Harry chuckled as he kept an eye on the two elderly wizards. "Yes I did notice that; I'll have to ask the headmaster about it when we get back."

Hermione seemed appeased by Harry's reply and wordlessly took his hand as the elderly wizards led them into the heart of an immense building that looked to be a pagoda of sorts. A wizard that looked so old he made Dumbledore look young in comparison greeted them outside of a large set of doors and smiled. "Welcome to my school Mr.

Potter and Ms. Granger. I am headmaster Makito Suzuki. You may call me Makito as esteemed guests of our school. I believe I may be encountering you in the near future Mr. Potter, but I shall leave that secret for another time. Please follow me.”

The two older wizards turned back at a walk to the courtyard while Harry and Hermione shared a look that clearly communicated, *this was about to get very interesting*.

Just outside of Ottery St. Catchpole a decidedly darker task was taking place, a task that would spell all kinds of trouble for the inhabitants of Wizarding Britain.

“Come now Amos, surely you can see a good offer when it hits you square between the eyes,” the masked man cackled to the bound and bleeding wizard before him.

Spitting a wad of blood from his mouth he heard some shouts in the distance and said, "I'll never support that monster, so you can take your offer and shove it you cowards."

A second figure stepped forward and almost lovingly whispered, "*Crucio.*"

Amos thrashed about in his invisible bonds for a moment before the spell was lifted. "Never."

The second figure just laughed harshly and said, “Then you shall pay for the folly of your ways.” A single shout of Amos’ name rang out and the voice cackled, “Pity they’ll be too late to help you.”

Amos blinked as the figure wielded their wand and screamed, “*Avada Kedavra.*”

The green beam arced into Amos's chest and his blinking eyes stared unseeingly into the night sky, less than a mile from the safety of his home. With three soft pops the deatheaters vanished into the night. A moment later Cedric came sprinting into the clearing and he wailed, "No, Dad!"

The wails of those left behind haunted the night air of Ottery St. Catchpole, because the balance of the entire wizarding world had just shifted in a most unexpected way.

A/N: There it is, another chapter in the books, and yes as you can see I did kill a Diggory, just not the one everyone had expected me to.

Next chapter, we have the continuation of the trip to Japan and some fall out from the murder of Amos Diggory. To any of you that wondered, there will be a flashback to the ritual at the school, but it won't be dealt with in too much detail.

Thanks to everyone that has read and reviewed.

Question of the Chapter

If you had your choice of three things that was to happen in Deathly Hallows, what would it be?

A Harmonious ending where Ron is killed but HHr walk off into the sunset.

A R/Hr ending where Harry survives and lives happily ever after with Ginny. The OBHWF option for those in the know.

Or, an ending with no ships and the entire trio survives.

Chapter 8

“Now Harry, just remember how you did it at the driving range. If you do it like that we’ll win for sure,” Michael said in an encouraging tone.

Harry sighed as he scanned the fairway in front of him before bending down and placing his tee and ball into the ground. It wasn’t necessarily that he had a problem with golf, quite the contrary actually, but he did not much care for the playing partners they had. Jack and David Fujiyama were clearly father and son, and the apple and the tree it fell from were not pleasant company in what should be a relaxed environment. They both were interminably competitive and could make catty remarks with the best of the witches at Hogwarts. In fact, if the remarks hadn’t been aimed at both him and Michael it might have been somewhat amusing to watch them caterwaul about.

Instead, Harry had been informed that his glasses were of inferior quality, he was sort of short and scrawny for his age, and that his boarding school mustn’t be that exclusive. Of course each comment had no factual basis, and Harry was certain that Hermione’s previous description of the relationship between her father and Jack Fujiyama must be a secondhand account, because Michael’s face had been taut with tension and hope that he could finally shut his colleague’s mouth with a whipping on the links.

Harry took the driver from the golf set Michael had purchased for him earlier in the day and took the driver head cover off; amusingly enough the club covers were all dragons. Harry took a couple of practice swings and prepared to approach the ball when David sniped, “You know Harry you might have better luck with an iron. I doubt a beginner like you could find the fairway anywhere but in your dreams.”

Harry closed his eyes and pictured Malfoy at his worst, a fair comparison before he took a calming breath and one last practice swing. With a smooth swing that displayed his inherent athletic ability Harry cleanly struck the ball and watched as it tailed down the right center of the fairway coming to a stop in the intermediate cut.

Michael grinned as he patted Harry on the back. “My Harry, that must be at least 240 meters out there, well struck lad.” Leaning closer he whispered, “If you drive like that all day and give me a couple of putts on the green we’ll murder them son.”

Harry grinned and returned his club to the bag, suddenly feeling much better about how the afternoon on the course would transpire. Kasagi Golf Course was a rather decadent place to play a round of golf by the way Michael was gushing over it. In fact, if Harry could read anything into the elder man's rhetoric it was that the golf was an opportunity to smash the Fujiyamas more than anything else.

They had eaten a nice western meal in the clubhouse restaurant and even taken the time to stretch and visit a masseuse the club provided. By the time they had reached the tee box for their afternoon tee off Harry understood by insinuation that golf could be a very expensive hobby if he took it up.

David took the tee as had been determined by the older men, and with a jerky swing the ball took a steep hook off into the rough only half the distance Harry's ball had traveled. The teenager winced as his father's face suddenly took on an overwhelmingly red pallor. David was a much bigger young man than Harry, weighing at least 50 kilos more while only being a couple of centimeters taller, but what Harry lacked in overall size he made up for in lanky athleticism ten fold over.

[illegible]

While Dan and Harry were enjoying the first bit of their golf round darker tidings were sweeping over the London night. The news of Amos Diggory's murder had been limited to those with intimate connections to the Ministry, both for better and for worse.

The precarious balance the moderates had been able to strike a few times since the three factions took hold were the only properly approved motions the Ministry had made in nearly two months. With Diggory gone the position of head of Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures would be filled from within the department for practicality reasons. Unfortunately one Ministry employee had both the experience and connections to make it a

Harry nodded as they watched Jack hit a decent albeit short drive to the fairway. The older Fujiyama was an above average golfer, but it wasn't enough to make up for the duffer that his son was.

Jack smiled slightly and said, "Well, we might actually win this hole boys. Better than nothing I suppose."

Harry and Michael nodded but shared a look as Jack turned his back to him. The Fujiyamas had only halved one hole, and it had become a medal play round halfway through just for sport if nothing else. While victory had been clinched on the eleventh hole, they wanted a complete victory to cap off their total humbling of their playing partners.

Michael started the cart up and they drove to within thirty yards of the Fujiyamas ball where they watched David hook it into the water twenty yards up from their own ball, effectively clinching the hole if they could avoid the same pitfall with their own shot.

Michael nodded in smug satisfaction as he drove up the cart path and parked a few feet from his ball, grabbing a couple of clubs and with a jerk of his head Harry as well. The elder Granger walked into the fairway bunker carefully with both of his clubs in hand before he said, "You know Harry it occurs to me that I haven't completely fulfilled my fatherly obligations in regards to a young man dating my little girl."

Harry quirked a bemused eyebrow and wasn't sure if the older man was serious so he replied, "Oh?"

Michael nodded and with no humor said, “Needless to say, if you ever hurt my little girl I will show you the pain a dentist can subject an unwilling patient to.”

Harry gulped lightly as visions of drills danced in his head before he nodded and Michael grinned, “Have you ever seen the movie Marathon Man Harry?”

Harry shook his head and Michael smirked, "I'll rent it for when we get back home."

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While Harry and Michael were out golfing Hermione and Bianca had taken the opportunity to visit a major tourist destination, a day spa.

As they were sitting in the mud bath portion of their spa Bianca finally broached a motherly question of her own. "Dear, has Harry enjoyed himself so far this summer?"

Hermione managed a small smile. "I think so, but with Harry happiness is a relative thing."

Bianca nodded. "He really has had a hard life, hasn't he?"

Hermione shifted in her mud bath a little before she replied, "He has, but I think he's begun to deal with it as opposed to burying everything down. Harry is and was a terribly repressed person thanks to his horrid family. The Harry you've seen here this week is the most uninhibited and carefree I've ever seen him aside from when he is in the air. I about had an aneurism when he actually went for dad's karaoke idea. But I do think he needs this; he needs just a week to separate himself from his reality and relax."

Bianca nodded pensively. "Do you think when whatever this business you are keeping from us is over he'll be able to be like he is now?"

Hermione felt a lead weight in her gut as she pondered how horrid the press and ministry would be when Harry defeated Voldemort. In Hermione's mind she couldn't allow any other possibility, but she knew Harry would be miserable with any more attention than the press was already giving him. Finally she replied, "I think so, but it won't be back at home. The press and all of the crazies would never give him a moment of peace. If we're still together we'd probably end up in the States or maybe even Australia. I can't see Harry learning a new language after all."

Bianca frowned thoughtfully. "You really think it would be that bad Dear?"

Hermione nodded and was about to reply when their attendants entered the room and helped them out of the mud bath before ushering them away to the sauna. Fortunately the summertime was not a busy time for the day spa so they were left alone again.

Finally with a chance to answer she replied, "Mum you remember how stupid I was about Harry Potter before I went off to Hogwarts. I went on and on about going to school with the Boy-Who-Lived for so long that I even fantasized about meeting him. I mean I got over it rather quickly when I realized that he wasn't anything like the books said he would be, but those that grew up listening to stories about him all treat him like some savior, even if they don't realize it. The sad thing is Harry still tries to live up to all of the hype."

Bianca found herself incapable of an intelligent reply; in fact the past minute and a half was the most Hermione had opened up in a very long time. In the end she decided silence was the best option. She'd have more time to devise a means of helping her daughter out, magic or not.

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The round of golf well over Harry sat in the passenger seat of the car Michael had rented for their little day excursion to the course. It had been an eventful first five days in Japan, and he couldn't help but think back to the ritual at the magical school.

### *Flashback*

*Harry watched spell bound as the students continued their intricate dance for the ritual, gaping openly at some of the strange spells and sacrifices the students were making as the staff and headmaster looked on proudly.*

*Spirits began to emerge from the intricately drawn Japanese runes and it was a twisted reminder of his duel with Voldemort in the graveyard. Thinking back to that night he resolved to be prepared the next time he would face the dark wizard, and thanks to the prophecy it would happen and he was betting on it happening sooner rather than later.*

*He never noticed as Headmaster Suzuki walked behind him and in that all knowing way that Dumbledore had nearly perfected he said, "You know Mr. Potter, there are more ways to talk to the dead than what you've seen."*

*Harry blinked in surprise before he turned back to the older wizard.  
"What do you mean?"*

*Suzuki merely smiled. "If I told you Mr. Potter, then I would ruin the surprise. But do not fear that which you can not explain. And before you ask, that statement will make sense when the moment is right."*

*Harry could only blink as the older wizard walked away soundlessly.  
What the bloody hell was that all about?*

That conversation was still echoing around in Harry's head as Michael pulled the car into the hotel's drive. The round of golf had been surprisingly fun and Michael hadn't needed to work hard to procure a promise of future golf dates. As the car came to a stop Michael popped the trunk to grab their clubs.

He glanced once at Harry's contemplative expression and asked, "Something on your mind kid?"

Harry gave Michael a rueful grin. "Always is, but nothing more than normal."

Michael gave Harry a slow grin before he said, "Girls should be back by now; be prepared for some very interesting odors Harry. Bianca likes to pamper herself occasionally, so I've gotten use to the smell, but well you'll see or rather smell what I am talking about soon enough."

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It came as no surprise to Dumbledore as Walden Macnair was appointed to replace Amos Diggory. The man's death had led to some gaps in Ministry groups sympathetic to the Order, and also to a grieving young man that had already been awarded the Head Boy position. Would Cedric still wish to have those responsibilities? Thankfully the young man had drafted a letter and indicated that he would indeed continue on as his father would have wanted. A pity it had to have that qualifier in the first place.

The Order was growing stagnant in the week and a half with Harry away. The Weasleys all seemed to lack some luster, and perhaps the

one moment of amusement had come when Sirius had gone out on a blind date arranged by Tonks. Sirius had returned much earlier than expected with a glowing red handprint on his face and he muttered, "Well how am I supposed to bloody well know that girls don't like a nice snog after they are teenagers."

Hagrid and Remus were out on assignment to the werewolves and giants, and the school year was rapidly approaching. As Dumbledore enjoyed a nice dinner at Grimmauld Place thanks to the dual courtesies of Dobby and Molly Weasley he had a spot of good news.

“Molly, after contacting my friend it has come to my attention that the Burrow’s wards have been sufficiently upgraded to ensure you and your family’s safety.”

Molly nodded from her place at the table as she said, “Yes I’d like to visit the Diggory’s before the kids go back to Hogwarts. I’ll talk to Arthur about it, but we should be out of this dreary place in a couple of days.”

Sirius merely smirked in response. He was well aware his ancestral home wasn't much to look at or live in, but it served its purpose. In fact, he much preferred the tropical mansion that he had stayed at for a time over a year earlier.

His smirk turned to a scowl when he glanced over at Remus and Tonks. Their laughs had echoed throughout Grimmauld Place when news of his dating disaster had hit their ears. It was true that while at Hogwarts Sirius was quite the ladies man, but nearly seventeen years had passed since he had been with a woman with romance as the aim of their time together.

He sighed heavily as he glanced over to the far corner to catch a glimpse of the calendar. Harry would be back in four days, and the six days he had been gone had seemed like forever. He had much he needed to fill his godson in on, and the days until the return to Hogwarts made time of the essence.

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“Come on Harry, if those two are going to lollygag then we needn’t wait for them to get up here.” Bianca said excitedly in a very Hermione-like tone of voice.

Harry couldn’t help smiling at the effervescence his girlfriend’s mother had obviously passed on to Hermione, but while his girlfriend thrived on books and learning it seemed her mother thrived on challenges of all varieties. He picked up the pace as they trekked up the side of Mt. Fuji. They were already past the seventh hut indicating their progress and Bianca had provided all of them with walking sticks to receive the tourist badge of honor.

Bianca had planned a hike to 10,000 feet and they were over 8,500 feet where the air had finally begun to thin out and separate the pretenders from the contenders as it were. While Michael and Hermione were both in admirable physical health, their cardiovascular condition wasn’t quite up to snuff compared to Harry and Bianca and it had led to a gap of about half a kilometer. Close enough where they could still be spotted by the stark contrast of their brightly colored clothing and the rock and stone of the volcanic mountain.

“So Harry, not a bad thing to do for a day while on vacation, is it?” Bianca smiled as she stopped for a break on the terraced trail cut across the slope of the mountain.

Harry tried to take in a deep breath of the pristine air of the mountain, managing less air than his lungs were acclimated to as he wheezed, “It’s a nice alternative to a round of golf, that’s for certain.”

Bianca laughed. “Yes well, Michael has been crowing about his defeat of the evil Fujiyamas to anyone who bothers to listen.”

She leaned back against the fence lining the path and gazed down onto the valley beneath before she said, “It’s beautiful, isn’t it Harry?”

Harry looked out across the valley and quietly replied after a moment’s silence, “It makes me feel small and insignificant.”

Bianca nodded thoughtfully at Harry’s answer. “It does at that. But that’s just a matter of scale Harry; don’t forget to see the tree when in

the forest. Now tell me Harry, what are the most beautiful things you have ever seen?"

Harry furrowed his brow in thought. "Well I suppose seeing Hogwarts for the first time was pretty amazing. Seeing Hermione at the Yule Ball; she was so beautiful that night. I've always thought she was pretty, but she took my breath away that night. Seeing the highlands around the castle from Buckbeak's back was pretty amazing too."

Bianca smiled, "Hermione tells me that your patronus takes on the form of a stag. Now while I could never see it, I believe Hermione stated that it is only possible to conjure a corporeal patronus if you have mental discipline and an ability to focus on the happiest memory you can. If not for your own sake, then please remember for Hermione's sake that there are beautiful things in this world Harry. Things so beautiful that you must live long enough to experience them. Things like the birth of a child, and your child's first day of school. Seeing a rainbow and really taking the time to appreciate how beautiful it is. No matter how hard life can be, those precious moments make any struggle worth it."

Harry ran a hand through his hair before he nodded and quietly said, "I'll try to Mrs. Granger."

Bianca smiled as she gazed down the path. "Looks like Michael and Hermione have finally managed to catch up. Why don't we slow up the pace and enjoy the view the rest of the hike. Never know when our next chance for something like this might be you know."

Harry nodded as he smiled and waved to Hermione as she approached. He never caught the thoughtful frown that stole across Bianca's face, nor would he have grasped what she was frowning about in the first place.

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Ron and Ginny shared a look of near exhaustion after finishing their move back to the Burrow; the twins had been off scheming as they had been the entire summer. The only evidence of their activity would be the random pop as they showed off their newly gained ability of apparition thanks to the test they had passed a few weeks earlier.

Their mother had been nearly frantic as she scuttled about the house, muttering something about faulty housekeeping charms as she charmed away any dust she could find.

Ron was out back in the garden chucking garden gnomes with Ginny when he whined, "I wanted to be there when Harry and Hermione got back from Japan. Now I won't know what kind of cool things they did until the train ride or even later."

Ginny chuckled a gnome nearly fifty feet as she sighed, "It's Japan Ron and it isn't like they found the meaning of life while on vacation. Did we do anything like that when we went to Egypt?"

Ron shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, it's just I...well with Cedric's dad dead and everything I guess I want to spend as much time with my best friends as possible. Does that make me horribly sappy?"

Ginny shook her head but gave Ron a mischievous grin. "No, I'd say that qualifies you for the emotional depth of a tablespoon."

Ron arched his eyebrow as he tossed a gnome. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

Ginny laughed. "Well, I'd say at one point last year you ranked just above a thimble, so yeah it's a good thing."

Ron scrunched his nose up in disgust before he shrugged and laughed. "Well improvement is better than nothing I reckon."

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The week and a half long vacation had come to an end and the four Brits were on a return flight to London via British Airways. Hermione had long ago succumbed to sleep and her head was resting on Harry's shoulder as he covertly read the one magical text he had smuggled from Japan. A text on ways to contact the dead, it had been his own concession to the infuriating conversation he had shared with Headmaster Suzuki. He was currently reading on some rituals Mexican wizards undertook during their holiday Dia del Muertos.

The pilot came over the loudspeaker. "We are nearing our destination of Heathrow Airport, and I'd like to thank all of you for flying British Airways. Please exit the plane upon our landing as the flight attendants instruct you."

Harry closed his book and put it back into the carry on case he and Hermione shared before he gently roused his bushy haired girlfriend from her awkward nap. Hermione blinked her eyes open before she groaned, "Ow...remind me never to fall asleep on your shoulder again Harry."

Harry grinned. "It wasn't my shoulder that has you so sore, it was that you had to lean across the gap of our seats to even reach my shoulder. I'll have you know Ms. Granger that my shoulders are very muscular and perfect to sleep on."

Hermione snorted in a very unladylike manner. "Harry, you will never be what I would call muscular." Attempting to take some of the sting out of her statement she added, "But you are lovely just the way you are Harry. Muscles sag when you get older anyways, so it wouldn't be a good look when you get to be Dumbledore's age."

Harry merely shook his head at Hermione's rambling before he smiled as they touched down on the runway at Heathrow. Harry glanced down at his watch and sighed at the date shown, it was a week and a half until they would go to King's Cross and board the Express. He would be back to the Boy-Who-Lived and people who pointed and whispered, but maybe just maybe that wouldn't matter if he didn't think about it. He had thought about Bianca's words on Mt. Fuji frequently and could see the wisdom in them; he would seek out the good things in life and deal with the bad.

As they entered the airport proper they were greeted by the sight of Remus, Tonks, and Sirius waiting for them.

Sirius wrapped Harry into a tight hug as Remus and Tonks greeted the Grangers. Sirius broke the hug and asked with a smile, "Have a good trip Harry?"

Harry couldn't help but laugh at Sirius's enthusiasm before he grinned back. "It was brilliant; how have things been here?"

At this Sirius's smile faded some and he said, "I'm afraid that will have to wait until we get back home. But needless to say there has been some evil committed by Voldemort's forces and the Weasleys have returned to their own home."

Harry nodded with a small frown on his face before he smiled and gave Sirius one last hug. "We hiked up Mt. Fuji; we were 10,000 feet up and the view was amazing."

Sirius was about to reply when Hermione chimed in, "Yes and he left Dad and me behind and went ahead with my mum. Next time I'll bring a bike so I can at least make good time on the way back down."

The elder Grangers chuckled as Remus glanced down at his watch and declared, "We really should be going; we have a pair of timed portkeys and the clock is ticking."

Everyone nodded in agreement as they made their way to baggage claim. By some act of god all of their baggage was safe and where it should be. As they found a secluded nook of the airport where no eyes could wander, the group disappeared with the telltale swirl and flash of activating portkeys.

Harry, Hermione and Sirius arrived in the entrance hall of Grimmauld Place when Hermione asked, "How can a portkey work around the *Fidelius*?"

She was answered by a familiar voice. "If the secret keeper creates the portkey Ms. Granger, you will find the *Fidelius* quite fallible."

The three walked into the parlor room and were greeted by the sight of Dumbledore sitting in a seat stroking Fawkes' feathers.

Smiling tiredly Harry and Hermione were treated to a Dumbledore that looked every bit of his age as he motioned the three to chairs. Sighing heavily he said, "As per my instructions Sirius withheld the events of the past ten days until we all could talk. Eight days ago Amos Diggory was murdered by application of a killing curse. No Dark Mark was signaled into the sky making the crime untraceable, but it matches the typical kind of attacks Voldemort's forces

undertake; vastly superior numbers and minimal risk for his own supporters in the attack.”

Harry’s face was hardening with each word, “I-is Cedric ok?”

Dumbledore smiled tiredly. “Mr. Diggory sent me a letter indicating he still wished to be Head Boy and Hufflepuff Quidditch Captain, because it was what his father would have wanted him to do. I believe Mr. Diggory will be fine, but some kind words from a friend would never be remiss.”

Hermione watch Dumbledore for a moment longer before she asked, “While it is terrible that Cedric’s father was killed, I assume there is something worse happening that you wished to inform us of.”

Dumbledore blinked. “Yes Ms. Granger you once again cut straight to the chase so to speak. As you all know, Amos was a department head at the Ministry, and due to his death and the nature of the department only one candidate had enough experience and influence to be named the new head. Walden Macnair - you may remember him as the would-be executioner of a certain hippogriff. He is also a Death Eater for Voldemort, and like Lucius Malfoy successfully claimed he was under the *Imperius* during the first Death Eater trials. As a result the Ministry’s power struggle has shifted once again, and now only two factions remain, the hard liners and the conservatives. To maintain the balance Arthur has joined the hard liners, but I fear with Macnair in place the Order will fail in its attempts to sway both the giants and the werewolves from Voldemort’s forces. In fact, Hagrid has borne the reality of this concern with some very serious injuries. I dare say he and Maxime would not have escaped if not for the help of a new friend they brought along. I will leave any further explanations to Hagrid if he is well enough to start the term with the rest of the professors.”

Each of them was staring at Dumbledore in surprise. The old wizard rarely divulged as much in a year as he had in that one spiel. Harry’s mind was already turning over potential fall out from the Macnair appointment. In every way he reached the same conclusion: With two evenly divided factions within the Ministry there was no chance anything constructive could be accomplished beyond what had

already been set into motion. Voldemort's forces would be free to grow exponentially while the idiots at the Ministry effectively signed hundreds of death warrants.

With a disgusted snarl Harry stood from the table. "If you'll excuse me I need to find something to break, right now."

Hermione followed a moment later leaving Sirius and Dumbledore to let the exhaustion further seep into their bones. It was going to be a long year, and a war which had already taken so much from so many was only getting started.

A/N: So ends another chapter of this fic. Next chapter we will have the remainder of the summer holidays and the Express en route to Hogwarts. The answers last chapter varied and only in hindsight do I realize I failed to offer the choice of a HHR romance with Ron surviving. My apologies and thanks to all of you that have read and reviewed.

Question of the Chapter

As we approach the release of Deathly Hallows on July twenty first, the appearance of spoilers will become an ever present thing for those active in the fandom for better or for worse.

If you come upon spoilers for DH do you put stock in them, ignore them, avoid at all costs, or deal with them in your own unique way?

Chapter 9

Diagon Alley lacked some of the usual bustle Harry had grown accustomed to seeing over his first four years, although it wasn't a surprise based upon the unsolved attacks of the summer. A quick trip to Gringotts left robe shopping at Madam Malkin's and a quick stop at Flourish and Bott's to wrap up the security laden group's excursion.

Glancing around, Hermione frowned at the high amount of pointing and staring from the few witches and wizards brave enough to be out and about in such uncertain times. Suddenly out of the corner of her eye she noticed an elderly witch unfurl a copy of the day's *Prophet*. On the cover was a stock photo of Harry from during the tri-wizard tournament. The headline read:

Potter Gives Full Endorsement to Fudge Backed Coalition

Hermione growled as she pulled Harry's attention to the paper, and his own eyes narrowed as he got the gist of the article. With a motion of his hand, Remus approached with a bemused grin on his face.

Harry sighed. "Could one of you grab a copy of today's *Prophet*? And if we have time I think we should probably make a stop at their offices."

Remus nodded slowly and walked back to the other incognito Order members before Tonks disappeared into a crowd to find the nearest vendor.

Hermione hugged Harry's arm tightly and whispered, "There are ways to discredit a newspaper Harry, and I'll work on something when we get back to Sirius's place."

Harry nodded and gave her a quick peck on the cheek, which for Harry was a huge step in their relationship. He never had been exactly comfortable with shows of affection, but with Hermione he knew he had to make the effort and in many ways with time he grew to enjoy the effort.

Hermione was rather pleased by Harry's tame but sincere gesture but managed to softly suggest, "Why don't we get our robes for school while they are trying to find a copy of the Prophet?"

Harry merely shrugged as Hermione led him down the Alley amidst the whispers to Madam Malkin's for their uniforms.

Walking into the boutique style clothing shop they were immediately greeted by a pleasant looking blonde woman. "Hello, sir and miss is there anything I can help you with?"

Hermione sighed at Harry's lost look and she replied, "We both need new school robes. I'm afraid we've both outgrown our old ones."

The woman nodded. "Of course, as you may know we have our annual school sale on at the moment. Madam Malkin will be out to offer you final choice in style and color of your school robes. We have our typical assortment of charms available to be placed on the robes, but as I can see you both might be more interested in our various styles."

Hermione looked particularly perplexed as she asked, "How can there be styles for a uniform?"

The woman was about to reply when Madam Malkin bustled into the room before her eyes lit up. "Ah Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger I believe. Rebecca here will lead you to the fitting rooms, and if you want to try out any of our styles we can do so there."

After ushering the pair into an adjoining room Madam Malkin directed the pair to a couple of rotating platforms, which were vastly different from how Harry remembered being fitted for his robes back in first year. The magic of the uniforms allowed for their continued use his first four years at Hogwarts, but now Harry was determined to look a little bit better to match his own increasing opinion of his self worth.

A pair of magical measuring tapes went to task on both Harry and Hermione as Madam Malkin watched them in an unnerving manner. After the tapes finished the older witch said, "Mr. Potter, have you any idea of the damage the Ministry has done to small shop owners like myself?"

Harry sighed. "I imagine they rather bollixed it up, but since I caught your insinuation might I ask why you believe anything printed in the *Prophet*?"

Malkin appeared properly chastised and merely nodded before her focus returned to the task at hand. "Now, the robes you are fitted for before you enter Hogwarts are unisex for rather simple physiological reasons. Simply stated pre-pubescent and adolescent students are rarely pleased with their bodies in such awkward states. When students come in for their second fittings we tend to get a fit that each individual is comfortable with. Now if you don't mind my opinion I have suggestions for both of you."

Harry and Hermione shared a look, although being a male it meant less to the wizard than the witch. Hermione had certainly grown into her looks as she aged. Her hair was still rather bushy but more manageable and her body shape was above average in her mind.

While she in no way wished to be ogled by the male members of the student populace, she did wish to have a more appealing look for Harry whenever she could. This fact would have made the sensibilities of the 11-year-old bright eyed girl scream in indignity but Hermione was slowly learning that the older she got the more many of her preconceived notions about the world were proven wrong.

Hermione softly replied, "We're listening Madam Malkin."

Harry merely arched an eyebrow in invitation as Madam Malkin stated, "Now Mr. Potter, you have a station in our society that transcends your association with the moniker of the Boy-Who-Lived. The Potters are a very old and influential family, which has always lingered far more on the side of tolerance than other old families. I believe a set of our luxury class robes would be the best choice if you wish to show respect to your family name."

Harry sighed heavily before his eyes took on a calculating gleam as he said, "That's fine, but could you get the same for Hermione please?"

Hermione and Madam Malkin looked at Harry strangely before he explained, "Well, by all accounts Hermione and I are dating and I've always felt she was a part of my family."

Hermione's expression softened and Madam Malkin clucked her tongue and replied, "Very well Mr. Potter, but be aware you are making an informal statement of your intentions towards Ms. Granger by requesting these accommodations."

Harry merely waved it away with a motion of his hand and Madam Malkin turned towards a pleased but startled looking Hermione. "Ms. Granger, you understand the symbolism of Mr. Potter's gesture?"

Hermione nodded and Madam Malkin continued, "And you have no complaints about this?" Hermione shook her head numbly as the older witch gave a succinct nod.

Madam Malkin flicked her wand once before she stated, "I can place the Potter family crest on both of your robes for a minimal increase, and I believe as the head of your family it would be wise to do so."

Harry merely shrugged. "As long as it isn't too showy that's fine with me Ma'am."

Madam Malkin smiled this time before she turned to Hermione. "Now Ms. Granger, you do understand that many witches do indeed get their second set of school robes well before you have. Generally speaking, form fitting robes are meant to advertise the availability of a young witch to suitors. Seeing as how it appears you and Mr. Potter are spoken for, I suggest something much more conservative and yet still pleasing to the eye. I'd like to give you a snugger fit on your shoulder and chest, and still leave the robes loose everywhere else. As a lady in waiting with Mr. Potter, I believe this combination would give you countless options for clothes underneath your robes when not wearing your uniforms."

Hermione merely nodded and Madam Malkin clapped her hands together. "Very well, your orders should be done in an hour at the most. Feel free to wander the Alley until then."

As they exited the shop Hermione took Harry's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze before she treated him with one of her beaming smiles. Their nice little moment ended as they prepared to enter Flourish and Bott's before they heard a familiar nasally voice say, "Ah, it's Potty and his pet. Good to see you finally decided to support the winning team."

Harry and Hermione groaned before turning to find themselves face to face with Draco Malfoy and the equally unpleasant sneering visage of Narcissa Malfoy. Harry sighed before he said, "I assure you Malfoy I would never support Fudge. But, maybe he'll hear from a solicitor friend of mine about using me without my consent."

Narcissa stepped in. "I've always thought your family was rather uppity Mr. Potter, but you are far worse than your parents ever were. At least they knew when they were speaking to their betters."

Hermione snorted. "I highly doubt Harry's parents gave a whole lot of thought to you or your horrid husband."

Narcissa's eyes bulged for a moment making the blonde haired woman look rather strange in conjunction with her upturned nose before she replied, "I see my son was right about you. You are nothing more than the garbage of our society, trying to marry up instead of remaining in the gutter where you belong."

Hermione sniffed once, indicating the barb had hit close to where she housed her insecurities before Harry said in a very cool tone. "I suggest you let us be Mrs. Malfoy. I don't take kindly to people being rude to Hermione, and while I'm sure she could wipe the Alley up with your smug face, she'd have to wait in line for me to have a crack at you first. Trust me, while your disposition isn't much better than one you have nothing on a dragon."

Harry squeezed Hermione's hand and they turned back around, making sure to march into Flourish and Bott's without sparing a glance back at the sputtering purebloods.

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"Oh Malinda, I'm so sorry for your loss. Amos was a good man, and if you need anything don't think anything about sending me a Floo call." Molly patted her friend, albeit not a close one, as the woman cried tears only a recently widowed woman could.

Malinda sniffed for a moment before she wailed, "Amos wouldn't hurt a fly Molly, why would they take him from Cedric and me?"

Molly made some soothing noises as the women held their embrace; words really wouldn't sooth the grieving woman's pain but comfort from a friend could help.

Unbeknownst to the two women Cedric was listening in on the conversation, his face grim and taut with exhaustion. Glancing down, in his hand was a well loved photo of him and his father several years earlier. Amos was spinning a five year old Cedric around in circles, as his younger version giggled wildly. Occasionally, Amos would set his son down and the pair would wave back at the camera. It was a harsh reminder of what he had lost.

A single tear ran down his cheek and he whispered brokenly at the photo, "I'll stay strong for you Dad."

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In his office of the *Daily Prophet* David McNerney was reading the newest edition as was his ritual; being head of the newspaper he grinned whenever he could get a headline on Harry Potter. The fact that Potter's endorsement had come from Fudge's office with no corroboration wouldn't hurt circulation numbers at all. Potter was the golden one of the moment, and scores of witches craved any news beyond the tripe *Teen Witch Weekly* produced.

As he continued on past the front page his buzzer sounded, and his secretary's voice came over the speaker, "Mr. McNerney, Harry Potter and a couple of friends are here to discuss business. Should I let them in?"

McNerney blinked in astonishment. Perhaps Potter wanted to give an additional interview to go with the statement from the morning. His

eyes lit up with more than a hint of greed as he did what so many wizards did, overlooking the obvious for his own wants.

Harry entered the office, dressed rather sharply, with a bushy haired girl he recognized as the Granger girl Potter was known to cavort with and a tired looking man with streaks of gray in his brown hair. Swallowing nervously at the look on Potter's face he tried to smile. "Ah Mr. Potter and friends please take a seat and we can get down to business. Now, what can I help you with today?"

Harry tersely replied, "Do you make it practice to publish statements without having any proof that the statements were indeed made?"

McNerney winced as he realized that Fudge had played him, but he decided to play his cards close to his vest. "I received communication from the Minister of Magic Mr. Potter. How am I to know it was a fabricated statement?"

Harry didn't even blink, which he could tell was unnerving to the pathetic man. "I have a feeling that my solicitor would very much like to contact you Mr. McNerney. However, I will dissuade him from contact with a couple of stipulations."

McNerney's mouth had gone dry as he exclaimed, "But, you're the Boy-Who-Lived, you can't blackmail me!"

Harry laughed dryly. "I'm not blackmailing anyone, but I am giving you conditions that will allow you to keep your pathetic little rag."

McNerney sagged in his seat resignedly and asked, "What are your conditions?"

Harry glanced over at Hermione and Remus, receiving a pair of encouraging nods. "First, you need to corroborate any future stories from the Ministry with a third party free of the Ministry's influence before publishing a word. Trust me Mr. McNerney; I have eyes and ears everywhere so I will know if you fail in this measure." Harry had added this part to the confrontation as a means of intimidating the obviously weak willed man into submission.

Harry continued undaunted. "Next, I want a retraction tomorrow and a story as large as the one in today's edition that clearly states that Fudge's released apparent endorsement at my hands was completely fabricated by the Minister and that I have no political aspirations at the moment. If you can do this then I will have no further demands as to this transgression. I make no promises for the future however."

McNerney swallowed heavily before he said, "You do realize the Minister will never allow this news to reach the public, don't you?"

Harry shrugged. "That is your concern Mr. McNerney, however I will be watching for tomorrow's edition to see if you uphold your end of this little agreement. Otherwise, the *Daily Prophet* will be under my management in the near future."

McNerney's complexion was rather pallid as he said, "I'll do my best Mr. Potter."

Harry sighed heavily before he added, "If you do this, then you show you can be trusted to an extent. Perhaps this might open future exclusive opportunities for your paper. But, only time will tell as to that sir."

McNerney merely nodded as Harry and his companions stood. "Thank you for your time Mr. McNerney, I look forward to seeing the retraction tomorrow."

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The next morning Harry, Hermione and the other occupants of Grimmauld Place were eating breakfast when the pay off for their side trip became evident.

Hermione was spreading some butter on Harry's toast much to the amusement of Remus and Sirius when Tonks tumbled into the house through the fireplace.

Dusting her shoulders off with a sheepish expression they all noticed the copy of the *Prophet* clutched tightly in her left hand.

Sirius was the first to blurt out, "What's the damage Nymmie?"

Tonks scowled but walked over to the table and handed the rolled newspaper to Harry. She sat down in Remus' lap before she replied, "I didn't read it, I just got it, took a shower and came over here."

Hermione snatched the paper from Harry, sticking out her tongue for good measure as she removed the rubber band that held the paper in a rolled fashion. Looking at the headline she nodded once before sharing with Harry as she read aloud:

Fudge's Claim of Potter's Support False

By: Gregarious Dribble

In a surprise visit to Daily Prophet offices yesterday, the Boy-Who-Lined informed one reporter that the release from Minister Fudge's office was in fact fabricated and false. Attempts to contact Minister Fudge for comment were unsuccessful, and lead this reporter to wonder how many more lies Minister Fudge has told.

Harry had a bland smile on his face as he said, "Well, I suppose he held up his end of the bargain, even if it was rather weak compared to the other headline."

Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation at Harry's attitude before she said, "Go ahead and just admit it right now, you never had any intention to explore those future opportunities with the *Prophet*, did you?"

Harry grinned sheepishly. “Well I might have embellished a little bit, but it wasn’t like I promised him future interviews. I said it might open up opportunities, but no I never promised the git anything.”

Hermione pursed her lips at her boyfriend before she shrugged; of course Harry wasn't exactly foolish enough to think that it would end so easily.

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It was September first and King's Cross was bustling with activity, but even to a greater extent were the happenings on platform 9 ¾. After a fair amount of wrangling by Harry and Hermione they managed to

free themselves of their minders as they prepared to board the train. Their trunks were taken and Hedwig had already been released to make the trip herself for the year.

Harry and Hermione were both sleekly dressed in their luxury robes that had the Potter family crest directly below beneath the symbol of Gryffindor house. Their Prefect badges gleamed in the bright September sun as they stepped onto the train ignoring all of the speculative glances and the equally distracting appreciative ones.

Hermione frowned in thought before she sat Crookshanks down and said, "Crookshanks, find Ron and the others and stay with them. I doubt Cedric and Patricia would care to have your company at the Prefect's meeting. We'll find you after the meeting is over, ok?"

Crookshanks merely nodded smugly before he took off down the train searching for the youngest Weasley spawn. Harry chuckled at the part Kneazle's attitude before he pondered, "Patricia was the one that had the breakdown during her OWL exams a couple of years ago, wasn't she?"

Hermione smiled at Harry as they worked their way to the front of the train and the Head's compartment as she replied, "Just hope I don't do the same, or there will be no snogging for you."

Harry smirked and then paused, wisely holding his tongue before he settled on, "I'll do my best to keep you relaxed Hermione."

Hermione stuck out her tongue and they both laughed as they approached the compartment for the meeting. Their moment of relative peace ended when a nasally female voice called out, "Oh Potter, drop the mudblood and I'll show you what a Slytherin can do."

The pair ignored the voice and Harry held the compartment door open as Hermione stepped inside with Harry quickly following, then shut the door before the trailing voice could make any more noise.

Cedric eyed Harry and Hermione bemusedly before he said, "Looks like you two were fleeing from something. Where's that Gryffindor courage?"

Harry chuckled dryly. "Even a Gryffindor knows when to run Cedric, and being propositioned by a Slytherin is the signal to run."

Hermione giggled before she took a good look at Cedric; the sandy haired handsome teen looked tired but not excessively so. Finally she settled on saying, "If you ever need anyone to talk to Cedric, Harry and I will be here for you. I might not know exactly what you're going through but Harry has some idea and I'm a good listener." Harry nodded resolutely as he pulled Hermione into his side.

Cedric's smile faltered for a moment and raw grief shone in his eyes for that fleeting time before he cleared his throat and quietly said, "Thanks that means a lot." The pair merely nodded, genuine concern shining in their eyes.

As the Head Girl entered the compartment the four caught up on the mundane details of the coming school year, waiting patiently for the other 20 students necessary to start the meeting.

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Ron was in a rather bitter mood as he absently rubbed the normally grumpy hell beast Hermione named Crookshanks. Lavender had seemingly snubbed him when he asked to stay in a compartment with her and the Patil twins, as Parvati had shut the compartment door in his face while she giggled. He didn't particularly want to discuss this fact with Ginny, because he knew his sister would get in trouble for hexing the older girls in his defense.

Of course the rest of the compartment was filled with either people he openly called family, or people he secretly thought were a joke. Neville Longbottom may very well have been his sister's pseudo-boyfriend type character, but he would always see the chubby bumbler that he remembered from his first year. Now, Luna Lovegood, she was something entirely different.

He vaguely knew the girl had grown up in Ottery St. Catchpole and had been a friend of Ginny's and an acquaintance of Harry and Hermione's through their many forays into the library over the previous year. Ron might have ceded many things the previous year, but becoming an avid library visitor was not one of them. He had

finished his summer homework with the bare minimum effort on each one. After all, papers were graded on content, and length had nothing to do with writing a good assignment.

Ron was broken from his attempts at arranging the universe as Luna asked, “Hello Ronald, you are looking well. Do you know if Harry and Hermione were able to see any of the Mercurial Grailgrabbers or Sulphurous Sockhoppers while on their trip?”

Ron blinked at the strange girl's question and he groaned. He did his best to ignore the question as he stared resolutely out the window, and he never noticed the fleeting hurt look that seemed so out of place on the ethereal blonde girl's face.

Cedric finally stood before the assorted group and as a popular Hufflepuff he knew all of the faces before him as he began his little speech as Head Boy. "This is going to be a banner year at Hogwarts if I have anything to say about it. As it stands now we are holding a Yule Ball again and I would like to ask for two volunteers now to set up the preparations in advance. Anyone care to volunteer?"

Hermione's hand shot into the air and Cedric suppressed his smirk. "Yes Hermione?"

Hermione took a deep breath to rein in her excitement before she said, "Harry and I will do it Cedric."

Harry arched an eyebrow in consternation at his girlfriend but she squeezed his hand surreptitiously in a silent promise of explanation later. Cedric merely nodded. "Good, just fill Patricia and me in as you go through the planning stages."

Harry sighed heavily at the glint of excitement in Hermione's eyes. Knowing her they'd need to request another time-turner just to complete all of her plans. Shaking his head Harry glanced around at the mostly familiar faces filling the compartment and barely managed to conceal his scowl as he spotted Draco Malfoy and the 'voice' from earlier, Tracey Davis. Unfortunately, Davis was eying him up in a way that made his skin crawl and beg for a shower all at once.

Harry's attention snapped back into focus when he heard Cedric say, "That's it for now; all of you try to keep an eye on the compartments around yours for disturbances and deal with them as the rulebook suggests you should. I'll have a schedule of your rounds posted up outside of my and Patricia's Head quarters by tomorrow. Everyone enjoy the feast and fifth years you all have a copy of your password on the parchment I gave to you."

Harry and Hermione led the congregation out the door in an attempt to enjoy a train ride without the idiocy of Draco Malfoy, or in Harry's case the saccharine behavior of Tracey Davis.

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Ron was still ignoring the other lame people of his compartment when the welcome sound of Harry and Hermione's voices could be heard. Hermione was laughing at something Harry said and Ron felt a pang; he wanted companionship like his friends had, and sitting here feeling sorry for himself wasn't going to get that done.

Harry smiled at his friends and asked, "How's the ride going so far?"

Ginny turned and replied with a grin, "Hey you two, how was the Prefect meeting?"

Hermione plopped down on the less empty bench next to someone reading a copy of the *Quibbler*, in her mind the paper was a farce. Harry sat next to her and as she burrowed into his shoulder she answered, "It was fascinating, Cedric is going to be a wonderful Head Boy."

Harry added, "It was fine until I found out Malfoy is a Prefect also."

Ron groaned, "They made that wanker a Prefect?"

Harry chuckled, "I thought the same thing mate."

Hermione elbowed her boyfriend in the ribs and shot Ron a glare before she motioned over to the person with the *Quibbler* and mouthed: *Who is that?*



Ron caught on and cleared his throat, "Um Luna, have you met Harry and Hermione?"

Luna pulled down her paper, which incidentally was also upside down, as she smiled dreamily. "Oh yes, Hermione has helped me with my Arithmancy in the past and I talked to Harry a few times last year in the library. How were your summers?"

Hermione smiled. "It was lovely for the most part. We studied ahead and even managed to take a nice vacation to Japan."

Luna nodded. "Daddy ran an article about Harry encountering a fire wolf, so I assumed as much."

Hermione opened her mouth before she closed it with an audible click, she had no retort to that and fire wolves were indeed mythical creatures that Japanese wizards believed in. Harry calmly replied, "I think I might just get a subscription to the *Quibbler*, it certainly sounds more interesting than the *Prophet*."

Luna beamed Harry a radiant smile before her face disappeared back behind the paper; little did anyone know that Harry's words were some of the kindest Luna had ever received in her life.

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If the group had hoped they would be spared Malfoy and his gang's presence they dared not to believe it would actually happen.

Their hope was soundly dispatched roughly an hour from Hogsmeade when the door to the compartment slid open to reveal Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Tracey Davis, Crabbe, and Goyle trying out their best sneers although Tracey's might have been more of a leer towards Harry, not that it mattered.

Harry and Hermione were cuddled together comfortably taking in the proceedings as Luna gazed at them dreamily while the Weasley siblings and Neville had their wands in hand preparing for an attack.

Malfoy leaned against the compartment door and drawled, "Well, well Potter and his band of merry Gryffindorks."

Luna interrupted with a smile and cheery wave. "I'm a Ravenclaw."

Malfoy blinked and waved his hand in a dismissive motion. "So Potter, this is the year I make your life a living hell."

Harry laughed wryly, amusement etched on his entire face. "I believe you overestimate your own importance Malfoy. Just remember, when the time comes your entire family will be the ones paying for your sins against me and mine."

Malfoy's sneer lost some of its energy. He was aware Potter had begun to change the previous year, but he was colder this year than the last. There was no hint of bragging or taunting in his words, just a promise of pain returned, something that worried the Malfoy heir greatly.

Tracey took her chance to speak in a syrupy tone. "Harry, whenever you get tired of the mudblood I'll be waiting for you." She scanned Hermione's robes and noticed the Potter family crest and she added, "But if you make me wait too long I'll come for you."

Hermione softly said, "Give it up now Davis, and don't think I haven't researched the laws of betrothal tampering since Harry made his offer."

Davis paled some as the other members of the compartment openly stared at Hermione and Harry, trying to somehow connect the implications of the bushy-haired Prefect's statement.

Malfoy and his crew of Slytherins disappeared a moment later, Malfoy slamming the doors shut in his own disgust at being outmaneuvered already this school year.

A moment later Ron weakly asked, "Betrothed?"

Harry looked only slightly surprised before Hermione answered, "Harry insisted I take the Potter family crest on my uniform. Checking through some antiquated law books I found that carrying a crest serves as the first stage of betrothal. Next obviously would be a ring of some sort, and then finally marriage to complete the betrothal."

Harry licked his lips and a slow smile crept onto his face. "Well Madam Malkin did say there was some symbolism of carrying the crest."

Hermione swiveled her neck on Harry's shoulder and smiled sweetly at her boyfriend, happy that he was taking news of the informal betrothal so well.

Neville's voice surprisingly broke the silence of the compartment as he earnestly said, "My gran asked me if I wanted to forward any betrothal offers this summer, so if you two have any questions I'll be glad to answer. Congratulations by the way, you two are good for each other."

Harry and Hermione merely smiled their thanks before Ron cleared his throat and added, "I like your robes, they erm are really nice, are they Acromantula silk?"

Harry nodded and his expression became guarded as he replied, "This next summer I'll be taking my hereditary seat on the Wizengamot back, so I figured I should make an effort to at least look the part. I owe that much to my mum and dad at the very least."

Ron turned the statement over on his head and suddenly felt ashamed for that fleeting thought of pity for himself over his friends having nicer robes. He squashed those feelings and once again tried to focus on concerning himself with being a better friend and person for the coming school year. An idle guilty thought of Luna Lovegood brushed his mind and he frowned to himself before stealing a covert glance at the girl who was now looking out the window of the train almost sadly. Ron was surprised the sad look struck a chord in him; maybe just maybe he would have to ask her what made her look so sad.

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Hogsmeade station was resplendent with the glow it always had as it welcomed students back for another year at Hogwarts. It was something unquantifiable, but it could only be described as magic and excitement mixed together. Harry grinned as he stepped onto the platform and took a deep drag of fresh air, stretching his legs and

back before Hermione's small hand found his and gave it a warm squeeze.

Hagrid was in his usual place. Whatever injuries he had sustained had been healed and his eyes hit Harry's, his face lighting up with a massive grin. "Hello 'Arry, 'Ermione, where's Ron at?"

Hermione smiled and replied, "I believe he was trying to chat up a girl."

Hagrid boomed a laugh. "Right, well I supper yer all getting to be that age. Of course, based on those robes looks like you two er already past that stage, aren't ya?"

Harry grinned and cheekily replied, "Ask the boss, I'm just along for the ride Hagrid."

Hermione scrunched her nose up adorably leaving the two males to laugh for a moment longer before she said, "Well, at least my training is finally starting to take hold on the big lug."

Hagrid graced them with one last smile as he said, "You two er just like Lily and James in the most important way. Yer happy and that's the most important thing, try to remember that yer two."

Harry and Hermione nodded as Hagrid moved away and bellowed, "Firs' years over here."

Walking towards the transport to the castle the couple was astounded to see the marvelous winged beasts that led the carriages. They were large black horses with wings tucked onto their backs, and their all white eyes were hauntingly beautiful. Their visual cataloging of the magnificent creatures was interrupted as a lilting but dreamy voice said, "I see you've both finally noticed the Thestrals. They're beautiful, aren't they?"

Harry nodded and quietly replied, "If it is possible to describe death as beautiful, then yes they are."

Luna merely nodded as Hermione thought aloud. "Thestrals, they can only be seen if you've witnessed death, right?"

Luna walked to Harry's left pulling even with the couple as she answered, "You'll find that there are many more things you can see in this world if you keep an open mind to them. I much prefer Thestrals to Unicorns; after all there aren't a great many things more pure and natural than death."

Harry swallowed thickly as he pondered Luna's statement before offering his hand to help both Luna and Hermione into the carriage. As he climbed aboard the carriage himself Harry could only wonder what kind of tidings the year at Hogwarts would bring.

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A/N: Thus ends another chapter, and I apologize for the slightly longer wait for this one. The next chapter might be a little bit longer as my final exams are for the next week. For a quick explanation, Harry and Hermione saw death on the night of the muggleborn attacks during the summer, hence they can both see Thestrals.

Next chapter we have the opening feast, and the opening salvo of Umbridge's war on the castle. Fair warning right now, the toad woman will work more quickly and more aggressively this time around, but that may or may not mean she will be out of Hogwarts faster. I guess you all will have to wait and see on that one.

Question of the chapter:

Those of you that are fans of the Harry Potter movies have all most likely seen the official trailers released for OOTP. What are your thoughts on some of the imagery and effects?

Chapter 10

The Great Hall was in fine form as was always the case for the opening feast; the house tables were lined with students and it seemed each and every one of them had a story about their summer holiday to tell.

Perhaps the only uncomfortable thing about it for Harry and his friends was the exaggerated response from many of the female members of the student body. In a way Harry had to acknowledge this is how Fleur must have felt the previous year as she made her way around the castle.

"Harry, what were you up to this summer? The *Prophet* has resorted to making up stories about you fighting dragons in Romania after you fought a pack of werewolves in Albania. It's been worse than bloody Lockhart," Lavender stated mildly trying to focus on Harry

Hermione caught the indirect dig thrown in her direction but her scathing retort was cut off as Harry groaned, "Are you serious? I mean why in the world would I go searching for more trouble?"

Seamus piped in. "My mum seems to think you are this golden boy of the wizarding world. She was even posting articles about you on the refrigerator. She's been telling my little sister stories about how she can marry you when she gets older," Seamus finished with slightly uncomfortable smile.

Harry began to beat his head on the table, eliciting a few laughs from the rest of the surrounding students. Ron wasn't in his usual place sitting across the table from Harry and Hermione, in fact he was in the middle of Parvati, Lavender, and a couple of fifth year girls that were the heirs apparent to the gossip throne.

Ron was trying desperately to look interested in the conversation and was just barely managing to remain motivated when he would catch a faint whiff of Lavender's hair. Lavender may have been a lot of less than perfect things, but she was pretty and was reasonably sensitive to others' feelings. Professor Trelawney had always told her she might have a touch of empathy to go with her sight. She noticed Ron

making a genuine effort for her and she reached over and grasped his hand giving it a small squeeze.

She delighted in the pleasant red Ron's ears turned but it seemingly focused the redhead more completely as the girls continued to gossip.

Meanwhile a little ways down the table Harry and Hermione were quietly conversing about the coming school year when Neville asked, "Hey, is it just me or is Professor Snape actually sort of smiling up at the staff table?"

Harry and Hermione both looked up to the staff table to see two very unusual sights. First, Professor Snape was sort of half smiling half smirking up at the staff table, which was very off putting in its own way. Additionally, Professor Dumbledore had a small frown on his face as he glanced discretely at both Professor Snape and the Ministry appointed Defense instructor.

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*Flashback: A week earlier in the Headmaster's office*

"Absolutely not Albus. I can see no way I will retain any credibility with the Dark Lord following the first series of Death Eater trials," Snape replied concisely.

"Severus, you must think of all of the good you can do as a spy. We can be alerted to plans and attacks well in advance," Dumbledore gently retorted.

"The Dark Lord never shared any of his plans before his first defeat; now he will trust his followers even less than before. I want to do good as opposed to hiding in the shadows of darkness." Snape replied passionately.

Dumbledore's eyes were cold as he said, "Severus, need I remind you of what our original promise was?"

Snape deflated some before he answered, "Albus, far be it from me to question your motives, but wouldn't I be more valuable to the cause brewing potions and acting as an Order operative when

needed? I can't face that evil again Albus, it will break me and I fear I will turn to the dark for strength."

Dumbledore's eyes regained some of their customary twinkle as he softly suggested, "I will not make you return to Voldemort's service, but you must tell Harry how Voldemort became familiar with the prophecy in the first place."

Snape paled further as he imagined how that conversation would go before he said, "Albus, isn't that your responsibility? I mean you chose to withhold so much from Potter already, you never informed him of his heritage, his parents, or even that your so called blood wards are only partially effective."

Dumbledore looked very old all of the sudden. "I have endeavored to do what is best for Harry and those he is destined to save. I understand that I have been mistaken far more often than I am accustomed to in regards to Harry. I should have obliviated you when I had the chance after you heard the prophecy, but the war was going so poorly and for the first time in years I had hope that the end could be near. There is not a day that passes that I do not feel the accusing stares of James and Lily Potter for how I have failed their only child, but I did what I felt I had to in order to ensure our way of survival."

Snape's eyes narrowed, "Albus, while I am loathe to make the comparison, you rationalize your feelings in a way very similar to the Dark Lord."

Dumbledore looked a little green at this revelation as he mumbled, "Alas with great power comes the responsibility to make it nearly unbearable. I will pay for my sins to the Potter family when the time comes Severus, but I agree the time has come for me to treat Harry as the leader he will be."

Snape finally relaxed. Albus was finally giving up his desire to have a spy in Voldemort's ranks. Suddenly, something in his mind screamed that the older wizard gave in far easier than he would have thought unless... Dumbledore already had his eye on another to become a spy. Snape had a suspicion of who it could be, but he would reserve any further speculation until he had proof.



It took a few minutes, but eventually Harry was able to suppress the urge to shower after seeing Snape truly smile. He was swiftly reminded of the cartoon he watched when he was younger at the Dursleys, but as he released a small chuckle he knew that he would never call Professor Snape the Grinch to his face. Now when he was around his friends, maybe that would be something different.

Unfurling a roll of parchment Professor McGonagall prepared to call out the first name, waiting patiently for the Sorting Hat to sing its usual song.

In times of old, when I was new,  
And Hogwarts barely started,  
The founders of our noble school  
Thought never to be parted.  
United by a common goal,  
They had the selfsame yearning  
To make the world's best magic school  
And pass along their learning.  
"Together we will build and teach"  
The four good friends decided.  
And never did they dream that they  
Might some day be divided.  
For were there such friends anywhere  
As Slytherin and Gryffindor?  
Unless it was the second pair  
Unless it was the second pair  
Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw,  
So how could it have gone so wrong?

How could such friendships fail?  
 Why, I was there, so I can tell  
 The whole sad, sorry tale.  
 Said Slytherin, "We'll teach just those  
 Whose ancestry's purest."  
 Said Ravenclaw, "We'll teach those whose  
 Intelligence is surest"  
 Said Gryffindor, "We'll teach all those  
 With brave deeds to their name."  
 Said Hufflepuff, "I'll teach the lot  
 And treat them just the same."  
 These differences caused little strife  
 When first they came to light.  
 For each of the four founders had  
 A house in which they might  
 Take only those they wanted, so,  
 For instance, Slytherin  
 Took only pure-blood wizards  
 Of great cunning just like him.  
 And only those of sharpest mind  
 Were taught by Ravenclaw  
 While the bravest and the boldest  
 Went to daring Gryffindor.  
 Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest  
 and taught them all she knew,  
 Thus, the houses and their founders  
 Maintained friendships firm and true.

So Hogwarts worked in harmony  
 for several happy years,  
 but then discord crept among us  
 feeding on our faults and fears.

The Houses that, like pillars four  
 had once held up our school  
 now turned upon each other and  
 divided, sought to rule.  
 And for a while it seemed the school  
 must meet an early end.  
 what with dueling and with fighting

and the clash of friend on friend.  
 And at last there came a morning  
 when old Slytherin departed  
 and though the fighting then died out  
 he left us quite downhearted.  
 And never since the founders four  
 were whittled down to three  
 have the Houses been united  
 as they once were meant to be.

And now the Sorting Hat is here  
 and you all know the score:  
 I sort you into Houses  
 because that is what I'm for.  
 But this year I'll go further,  
 listen closely to my song:  
 though condemned I am to split you  
 still I worry that it's wrong,  
 though I must fulfill my duty  
 and must quarter every year  
 still I wonder whether sorting  
 may not bring the end I fear.  
 Oh, know the perils, read the signs,  
 the warning history shows,  
 for our Hogwarts is in danger  
 from external, deadly foes  
 and we must unite inside her  
 or we'll crumble from within  
 I have told you, I have warned you...  
 let the Sorting now begin.

Hermione was furiously scribbling what she deemed the most important passages of the song as McGonagall, looking a little pale, called out with the tiniest hint of a quiver, "Euan Abercrombie."

The hall erupted into a series of whispered conversations as the sorting continued. Hermione finally looked over to Harry as she noticed he was deep in thought; it was a look she was slowly becoming accustomed to seeing on his face. It gave him a certain

depth that had always been bubbling under the surface for as long as she knew him.

Finally she grasped his hand and startled him out of his deep ruminations as she asked, "What were you thinking about?"

Harry blinked. "I think the Hat was actually telling us something beyond its usual message. I mean the Hat has had a look inside of everyone else's head here at the school. Don't you think it might know of a few of the Slytherins that could be considered trustworthy?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Are you going to talk to the Sorting Hat?"

Harry grinned, a true grin for the first time since they had arrived at the castle. "Well, it can't hurt, can it? I mean, we might as well make the effort. Although I'll know the Hat is barmy if it tells me to trust Malfoy."

Hermione barely managed to stifle a laugh at that mental image before she asked, "Do you think Professor Dumbledore will let you borrow the Hat?"

Harry shook his head. "Even if he would, I don't want to start racking up favors I owe to him. Things between us are finally settling down, and I don't want to mess with that."

Hermione nodded uncertainly and was about to reply when Dumbledore stood to make his standard announcements for the year.

"Welcome all to another year at Hogwarts. I won't stand between my hungry students and their food, so I will make announcements following the feast." Dumbledore opened his arms in an arc and the tables filled with food.

As Harry constructed a large ham and cheese sandwich he turned to Neville and asked, "What was that strange plant you had with you on the train Neville?"

Neville's eyes lit up as he replied, "Oh it's a *Mimulus mimbletonia*, my gran got it for me as soon as I got home for the summer."

Hermione nodded and interjected, "I hear their stink sap is really quite a detractor for any herbivores."

Neville nodded excitedly as he took a draught of his pumpkin juice before he reached into his pocket and extracted his new wand. "Ten and a half inches of Yew with a Griffin feather for the core. Mr. Ollivander seemed to think it was a very powerful core."

Harry nodded and gave a small smile, "That's brilliant Neville, and I imagine you kept your other wand just in case, didn't you?"

Neville merely smirked in response his face flush with the unfamiliar praise of his friends before he turned to Ginny who was beaming at him. She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek before she whispered in his ear, "I'm proud of you."

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The remainder of the feast bore witness to one other extraordinary change – Ron Weasley was actually exercising some of the table manners Ginny and Hermione had instructed him upon during the summer.

"So Lavender, I was wondering if you'd like to go to the next Hogsmeade weekend with me. Erm, you know like on a date." Ron finished somewhat lamely but managed to maintain eye contact the entire time as Ginny had instructed.

Lavender smiled shyly and she replied, "I'd like that."

Ron grinned and barely suppressed the urge to pump his fist in the air and do a little victory dance. Searching for a new topic he offered, "So you were telling me about your cousin on the carriage. What does she do for a living again?"

Lavender launched into an in depth description, and Ron relaxed ever so slightly; the first part of the battle had been a success after all.

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Finally, the meal ended and Dumbledore stood to give his announcements in earnest.

“Now that our stomachs are filled to the brim I believe it is time to make a few announcements for the coming term.”

Harry muttered, “This is going to be pleasant.”

Hermione made a disapproving noise which was wasted negated? by the slightly upturned corners of her mouth as Dumbledore continued, “This year at Hogwarts we are welcoming only one new member to the staff. Everyone please welcome Madam Delores Umbridge our new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor. She is an appointee from the Ministry, so let’s give her a warm welcome.”

A few cheers came from the sixth and seventh year Slytherins, but for the most part most refrained from commenting.

Dumbledore meant to continue when he was interrupted by a sickly sweet voice. “Hem Hem.”

Dumbledore blinked, apparently not accustomed to being interrupted during his opening remarks as he cleared his throat and said, “I believe Madam Umbridge would like to make an announcement.”

The sickly sweet voice rang out again, “That’s Professor Umbridge Headmaster.”

Dumbledore nodded slowly and waited for the squat woman with a slightly puggish face and a nauseating pink outfit to speak.

“Students of Hogwarts, I have been appointed by our distinguished Minister of Magic to bring discipline and academic standards back to Hogwarts. I look forward to the challenge and I hope you are all up to the task.” Umbridge nodded as though awarding herself some minor victory.

Dumbledore cleared his throat to regain the students’ attention. “Thank you Professor Umbridge for that enlightening speech. As I was saying, Mr. Filch wishes to remind all of you that magic in the halls between classes is forbidden and a list of banned items may be

found on his door if you should find yourself in possession of a questionable object. As many of you noted from your book lists we will be having a Yule Ball again this year. I will announce more details when we approach the date. For now Prefects please escort the younger students to the common rooms and instruct them as to the use of the password and the nature of the staircases.”

Harry sighed as Hermione popped up, “Come on Harry, we have to show the first years where to go, and we have to give out the password.”

Harry dutifully followed behind as he called out, “First years, please fall in line.”

Hermione gave him a grateful smile as each of the first year Gryffindors immediately fell in line after the order from the great Harry Potter. With their 11-year-old attention spans focused for the moment Hermione spoke, “Follow us, and we’ll try to answer any question you might have about the castle on the way to the common room.”

A little brown haired girl with wide sparkling hazel eyes named Monica Davenport asked, “I read in Hogwarts a History that the castle has ghosts. Why haven’t we seen any of them yet?”

Harry and Hermione shared a look; it was actually a good question that they didn’t have an answer to. Hermione offered, “Typically the four house ghosts are at the opening feast, but I’ll ask Professor McGonagall later and tell you why they were missing then.”

The rest of the trip up to the seventh floor involved the first years gazing at the portraits in amazement, which in turn led to the older students reminiscing about their first experiences in the castle.

Finally they reached the fat lady. She was conversing with Sir Cadogan about the new professor when Hermione said, “Pride of the Lions.”

The Fat Lady nodded and the door swung open as she softly said, “Welcome to Gryffindor Tower young lions.”

Harry led the way into the common room watching the first years pile into the room in scattered fashion before he said, "Now, the password will be changed bi-weekly and I expect you to ask for the password from myself, Hermione or one of the upperclassmen before you are stuck outside waiting for someone to leave. Up the right staircase are the boys' dorms, first year boys a sign will be on the door indicating your dorm room. I'll lead you up there and let you settle in. Girls, I believe Hermione wanted to give you a tour and discuss other issues." The first years split up by gender and the year in Gryffindor tower was underway.

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Back at Grimmauld Place Sirius was taking a swig from his firewhiskey bottle, ignoring the concerned gazes from Remus and Tonks. Harry was at Hogwarts again, what was he supposed to do now? His years at Azkaban certainly hadn't helped the trust issues he still had from his parents while growing up. Working just to keep busy really didn't seem very attractive either. Harry never had revealed what was bothering him so much at the Dursleys, and now that he was back at Hogwarts it would have to keep until Christmas.

Sirius sighed heavily, screwing the cap back on to the firewhiskey bottle. Drinking might take the ache away for a little bit, but it wasn't going to solve his problems either. It was time to discover what life existed for Sirius outside of Harry Potter, the young boy who had been his singular driving concern for the past few years.

He was broken from his depressing musings as Remus merely nodded, "You've reached that point, haven't you Padfoot?"

Sirius rubbed his throat before he hoarsely replied, "What now? I mean Harry is as safe as he is going to get for awhile, and I'm a free man. What do I do now?"

Remus put a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder before he replied, "You live Paddy, you go out meet people and you learn to trust them again. It will take time, but you can manage to have your own life and still keep Harry near the top of your concerns list. This summer has been so good for the both of you, but now it's time to see what you can do apart."

Sirius nodded as his eyes watered a little. "I'll start tomorrow; I owe it to James and Lily."

Remus smiled softly and squeezed his friend's shoulder, carefully pulling the firewhiskey bottle from unresisting hands. It was time to heal.

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Harry rolled out of bed reasonably early on the morning of the first day of classes. He yawned hugely, happy that Voldemort had stayed out of his dreams for the night. His only hope was that he could avoid Snape and Umbridge for a couple of days to give him time to get acclimated.

After a quick shower, Harry tossed on a polo shirt and pair of jeans before sliding his silk robes over the top. Pinning his prefect badge to just his breast on his robes Harry suddenly wondered if his parents would be proud of the person he was becoming. Remus had told him a few stories of his mother as a Prefect, and from the sounds of things she was a more relaxed version of how he saw Hermione.

Harry smiled and shook his head as he ran down the stairs, taking care to avoid the trick step, and he was greeted with a pair of open arms from Hermione. She smiled softly as they broke the hug as she asked, "Good night of sleep?"

Harry nodded and stifled a yawn. "Let's go get our time tables so we can figure out which books we need."

Hermione took his hand in agreement before she asked, "Did you make sure Ron was up?"

Harry shrugged as they exited the common room. "He was already up and gone by the time I woke up, so I have no idea where he is."

Hermione arched an eyebrow in surprise. "Ron was awake and gone before you woke up?" She snorted, "He must be really serious about Lavender."

Harry merely nodded before he added as an afterthought, "He might be getting some practice out on the pitch also though. I know he really wants the keeper position, but it is nice to see him so driven about something."

Hermione squeezed Harry's arm and replied, "I've always known Ron had the ability to succeed, maybe he found his calling in something aside from school work."

Harry chuckled. "Well, I'm sure his marks are going to suffer this year, but we'll help him study enough to make sure he doesn't fail out."

Hermione arched her eyebrow and smirked slightly. Harry gauged her reaction for a moment before he amended, "Alright, well, *I*ll help him with his work this year then."

Hermione nodded once and gave Harry a pat on the cheek. "I knew you weren't that thick Harry. Thank you for proving me right, on that count if nothing else."

Harry scrunched up his nose. "I don't know if I should feel complimented about that or not."

Hermione simply laughed in response. If the summer had proven nothing else to Harry it had taught him that even she had limits when it came to helping Ron. As they entered the Great Hall they spotted Ron sitting at the Gryffindor table with Lavender, his hair combed stylishly, and really not looking like the Ron Weasley they knew at all.

Harry eyed him queerly as they approached and he asked, "Alright Ron?"

Ron glanced up as Lavender, Parvati, and some younger Gryffindor girls started giggling, but their red haired friend simply replied, "Smashing Harry."

Harry opened and shut his mouth with an audible click. Hermione merely smiled and took her gob smacked boyfriend's hand leading him further down the table, but smiling at Lavender and Ron to take any sting from the gesture.

Hermione sat Harry down at the table and took a seat next to him before she muttered, "Way to be nice and discrete Harry."

Harry finally blinked. "What...but Ron...and smashing?"

Hermione giggled. "Honestly Harry, you are being a tad dramatic don't you think?"

Harry frowned and replied, "My friend turning into a bloody prep, that is ample cause for dramatics."

Hermione tutted, "Language Harry, we are Prefects after all."

Harry grimaced and served himself a bowl of porridge, liberally adding some honey and milk trying to take his mind off of Ron at the moment.

Professor McGonagall came along a moment later. "Ah Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger, I am to tell you that the ghosts were absent due to a deathday celebration at another castle nearby. Here are your timetables; I expect you both to keep the high standards you set last year. Mr. Potter, the Quidditch Cup is ours to win, Ms. Johnson will be talking with you about a practice schedule soon."

Harry nodded before he glanced over at his timetable; now he understood why OWL years had a tendency of driving students mad. First day of classes and he had History of Magic, Double Potions with Snape, Divination, and Defense Against the Dark Arts with Umbridge. Holding a spoonful of porridge up to his mouth he suddenly lost any form of appetite he still had, and watched as the porridge dribbled back down into the bowl.

Hermione sighed heavily and softly said, "Harry, I'll be right there today for every class but Divination. You are going to be just fine, so please stop pouting already and eat your food like a big boy should."

Harry cracked a small smile, even though he desperately wanted to scowl and answered, "You know, I am one more bad thing from acting like a completely petulant child."

Hermione stuck out her tongue in response and Harry smirked, "Well if I knew that acting like a brat would be all it takes..."

Hermione swatted his arm, blushing furiously before she answered in a superior voice, "I believe the word you meant was prat."

Harry chuckled and after finishing their respective breakfasts they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower to grab their books and supplies for the long day of classes ahead. By the time they had finished, a jog to Professor Binns' classroom was needed to avoid being late.

The spectral professor began to drone on and on about how the OWL exam would involve having a grasp of the goblin wars, and the separate histories of the Celtic magical tribes of the Roman era. Harry had long ago settled on the decision to ignore Binns for the term and instead study on his own time to learn the subject.

Harry was spending his time thinking up names for his and Hermione's animagus forms. If there was one thing Harry was fascinated by when he looked at Hermione, it was the expansive intelligence that could be seen simmering behind her eyes at all times. Those same eyes had transferred to her animagus form; eyes he now knew also could hold such emotions as love and happiness in equally vast quantities. Fortunately, the glossary in his History of Magic text provided the perfect answer - Athena, an ancient Greek goddess of wisdom and beauty.

He figured it would be only fair to allow Hermione the chance to choose his own name, and frankly he had faith she would give him a sufficiently cool nickname. As the distant sound of a bell could be heard Binns droned, "Next week we will begin our review of the Goblin War of 1312, be prepared for a lecture on Lothar the Bloodthirsty."

Hermione beamed at Harry and said, "I'm so proud of you, you stayed awake and took notes the entire class."

Harry sheepishly replied, "I wasn't taking notes, I was working on a nickname for you."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, "Nickname?"

Harry gulped. "You know, for when you are feeling particularly catty?"

Hermione's eyes widened but her lips were pursed. "You are planning on trying in History of Magic, aren't you?"

Harry nodded as he raised his hands defensively. "I can't learn from Binns Hermione, but I am reading the book and keeping up on my homework. If Binns happens to say something interesting you'll share it with me, won't you?"

Hermione nodded before she sighed heavily and muttered, "Bloody Double Potions with Snape."

Harry chuckled and replied, "They certainly didn't feel like easing us into the schedule at all, did they?"

Hermione sighed, "At least I have Arithmancy after lunch. You have to reap what you sow with that batty old cow."

Harry merely nodded; he had no intentions of doing anything but the minimum on Divination. Fortunately, he was learning the basics and intermediate aspects of Runes and Arithmancy to supplement his education. Even if it didn't transfer to his OWL results, Harry still was bound and determined to manage at least eight out of nine on his exams. Incidentally, Harry was grimly reminded that prophecies had their own ironic little role in his life for the foreseeable future.

Harry was broken from his brief foray into academia and his relative goals as he and Hermione entered Professor Snape's classroom.

Snape was up in the front of the classroom, a piece of chalk jotting down instructions for the potion to be brewed for the day. Malfoy and a dark haired boy Hermione knew to be Blaise Zabini were already seated in the front row to the right.

Hermione arched an eyebrow in challenge before she led Harry to the table at the front left and they settled in to prepare for class. The class slowly filled and to neither Harry nor Hermione's surprise Ron settled next to Lavender in the back of the class.

Snape finally finished preparing ingredients before he turned to the class. "This year in class, we will be taking a different approach to the art of potion creation. We will be making each of the potions the Ministry deems necessary to have an Ordinary Wizarding Level in the craft, but we will also be taking the time to integrate a potions creation project into the curriculum."

Hermione's hand shot up and Snape drawled, "Yes, Ms. Granger?"

"Professor, do you have any requirements on the potion we are creating?"

Snape arched an eyebrow. "Not as such Ms. Granger, but I would appreciate that you wait until I can discuss the project at length before you begin to berate me with questions. Someone with your supposed vast intellect should be able to understand the request. Am I understood?"

Hermione looked stung as she quietly answered, "Yes Professor." Harry frowned but refrained from speaking out on Hermione's behalf. It wasn't an unfair request by Snape even if it was dressed up in a back handed compliment to Hermione.

Snape silkily continued, "I am pairing each of you based upon your seating preference; because it has come to my attention that having an agreeable working environment is more conducive to success in this class. Today we will be working on a stabilization draught individually. It is well within each of your respective skill sets, so I expect a finished and correctly brewed potion at the end of class."

For once Potions was a resounding success as the vast majority of the class brewed the potion correctly with plenty of time to spare. Sadly, Crabbe and Goyle nearly needed some of the stabilization draught themselves when their respective cauldrons exploded at the same time.

As the Gryffindors all walked towards the Great Hall for lunch Neville commented, "I reckon this might be the best year of Potions with Snape yet. He even called my work above acceptable. I think I have a memory to produce one of those patronus things."

Dean chuckled. "Maybe Seamus will finally figure out how to turn water to rum by the end of the year."

Seamus chimed in, "That's not a bad idea mate, and even old Snapey won't be able to say anything about it."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly Seamus, this project is your chance to make a difference in the world under the supervision of a potions master. Why would you do something so stupid?"

Seamus grumbled something and shot Hermione what would settle for a vicious glare as they sat down at the Gryffindor house table.

Hermione buried her nose in an Arithmancy text, leaving Harry to fend for himself, when a sickly sweet voice that he had been relieved to avoid during the previous class sounded.

"Harry sweets, are you feeling ignored by your little mudblood pet?" Tracey sweetly asked.

"Tracey, why don't you go hang all over Draco or someone else you can be a trophy wife for," Harry replied tiredly.

Tracey stuck out her bottom lip in what amounted to a ridiculous looking pout before she bent down in front of Harry displaying her ample cleavage. To her surprise and the surprise of a couple of drooling Gryffindor sixth year boys Harry laughed. It wasn't a chuckle or light laugh, no it was a full on belly laugh.

Finally Tracey huffed and asked, "What's so funny Harry?"

Harry choked out between laughs, "How can you be so ridiculous?"

Tracey blinked and looked hurt for just a moment before she sniffed at Harry disdainfully and said, "You'll come around Harry, and I can be patient enough to wait for it to happen."

Harry sighed in resignation as the blonde haired Slytherin walked away, taking care to sway her hips to and fro. Unfortunately for her every single male at the table was watching except for her target, who was lazily watching his girlfriend page through a book with a look

of deep concentration on his face. He never noticed the grateful smile on her face because she covered it with her text.

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Sybil Trelawney wasn't what you could call a popular person; she had always been a little odd with her thick glasses and love of incense. While most were skeptical of her gifts she knew for a fact she had the inner eye. Her grandmother, an accomplished seer in her own right, had seen her gifts blossoming as she grew older.

Most of the time this meant many inane prophecies, such as what would be served for breakfast the next day or how many times the Headmaster would offer a student a lemon drop before one actually accepted the treat. Contrary to popular opinion, seers retained a memory of any prophecy given, and it was slowly driving her mad.

To put a complex gift simply, there was no way for her to guide or direct it, and that was slowly becoming a bigger problem as time progressed. Where at one time she had a tightly knit group of friends, she now found herself increasingly isolated from the rest of the world, her blessing and her curse the only constant companion she had any more.

As she stared into a crystal ball her expression brightened. At least she could predict the Potter boy's death today; that always made everything seem so much better.

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Hermione walked into Arithmancy, still silently seething over the scene that Slytherin trollop had made in front of the entire Great Hall during lunch. Harry had handled the situation as well as he could, but that didn't mean she had to like what had happened.

As she entered the classroom on the archive wing of the school Hermione began to do what she did best, think ahead. Although many would not believe it, Hermione Granger rarely had her undivided attention on any one given class at any time. Presently she was also thinking about what abomination Defense class would be with Umbridge in the Professor position. It was just how she was; in

fact had she not learned her lesson with the time turner in her third year she would have dropped dead from exhaustion trying to take independent study in a couple of classes in addition to the other ten classes.

She listened to her Arithmancy professor discuss spell constants in nauseating detail as her mind wandered to other somewhat less important thoughts.

Oddly enough, only one figure was always somewhere on her mind, and at the moment she was worried about what he would do if Umbridge tried to push his buttons. Hermione wasn't an expert on politics, but she understood Fudge and his faction's need to shake up Harry's golden public image with some spin. To date Harry hadn't given them anything worthy of being used as ammunition, however attempted murder on a staff member would definitely rate.

Before she knew it class was dismissing and Harry, most likely with frayed nerves, was going into what would amount to an ambush. It was enough to make her own blood boil, and nothing had even happened yet.

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Harry met Hermione outside of the Defense classroom, and the sardonic smile in place since Divination failed, as he noticed her fierce expression. In a soft voice he asked, "What's the matter?"

Hermione frowned and crossed her arms over her chest as she replied, "Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

Harry balked on an answer as the door swing open and the class bustled inside to prepare for the lesson. For once Hermione led Harry to a seat in the middle of the class in an attempt to avoid the discerning eye of Umbridge.

Ron and Lavender piled in next to them on the large desk and Lavender quietly asked, "Have either of you heard about Professor Umbridge?"

Harry softly replied, "She was the one who pushed through all of the anti-werewolf legislation a few years ago. I think she's Fudge's senior undersecretary."

Lavender merely nodded, not catching the hidden meaning in Harry's words as the classroom slowly filled with the other fifth year Gryffindor and Slytherin students.

As the doors to the classroom swung closed Umbridge sauntered down the same stairs that had borne witness to a possessed man, a dandy fraud, a man afflicted with lycanthropy, a grizzled auror veteran with a fake eye, and now Delores Umbridge a puppet of the Ministry.

Umbridge smiled sweetly at the class as she said, "Hello, and welcome to your OWL year of Defense Against the Dark Arts. I have been reviewing your previous years through class notes left by the other professors. Fortunately, a Ministry employee was able to undo the damage caused by the first three reprobates you had as professors in this class. With that in mind we will be focusing solely on the theory of defense this year. Are there any questions?"

Most of the class was completely silent but Malfoy had his hand raised and a vicious smirk playing on his face. Umbridge nodded to him and he asked, "Professor, I was wondering what your opinion is on the rumor that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned?"

Umbridge nodded and solemnly replied, "I am of the same opinion as the rest of the Ministry in that we know any such rumors are complete hogwash. It is not possible to come back from the dead.

Harry listened with narrowed eyes but refrained from speaking, when in reality he wanted nothing more than to show Umbridge the truth via some pensieve memories. However, he was interrupted when a voice from his left spoke out, "What a load of rubbish! The truth means nothing to you or most of the Ministry in charge. Also, what sense does it make to fall back behind in our practical defense work simply because we had a good professor for the second time in this subject?"

Umbridge grinned nastily as she asked, "Ms. Granger is it? I believe a detention for the next week is in order for that outburst, but I suppose

I shouldn't be surprised that someone of your background would act as such."

Hermione's face went a bright red, but it wasn't from embarrassment. In fact Harry could only remember one other time he had seen her so angry, and that was right before she socked Malfoy in third year. Harry was about to speak up in her defense when a hand from Hermione reached out and squeezed his reassuringly. Hermione Granger could fight her own battles, and this one just so happened to be against a toad.

A/N: So ends another chapter. I hope everyone enjoyed this trip through the first day of classes, because next chapter picks up with Hermione's detention. We will also move forward in time to Quidditch try outs and the ministry making moves within Hogwarts.

Thanks to everyone that has read and reviewed.

Question of the Chapter:

If you plan on reading Deathly Hallows when it is released how quickly do you plan on reading it?

Disclaimer: It's JKR's not mine, I highly doubt my version of the events would even reach her radar on a good day.

As always many thanks to my beta chem prof, he is the one who makes everything all readable and hopefully believable.

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"You aren't going to get away with this!" Hermione shrilly stated as her detention with Umbridge was ending. It had involved lines, which in and of themselves weren't a terrible punishment. No, it was the fact that she had been forced to use a blood quill instead of a usual quill. As her lip quivered Hermione sardonically thought of everything she had read on the torture device she had been forced to use. The quill would carve the writings of the victim into the back of their hand using the blood of the cuts to replenish the 'inkwell'.

Umbridge eyed Hermione maliciously for a long moment before she stated, "Little mudblood, your boyfriend may be the flavor of the month right now, but I have friends that reach higher and further than yours do. The ministry will not cower in the face of purported great wizards like Dumbledore or Baby Potter."

With tears in her eyes Hermione softly, but coldly retorted, "Harry is ten times the wizard Fudge will ever be." It was said in such a soft tone that Umbridge never heard it, and Hermione simply gathered her book bag and exited the defense classroom in search of the Gryffindor common room.

"I hope you have learned your lesson about what happens to little girls who lie," Umbridge sweetly called out as Hermione staggered out into the hall.

Anyone who knew Hermione could see a few conflicting things in her face. First, was the pain and a certain amount of shame for being placed in such a situation in the first place. Did she regret standing up for Harry even in light of her bloody and scarred hand? Nope, not a chance but that didn't change the fact that it had happened.

"Oh, and don't forget, this stays between us or I'll have your prefectship pulled, and your little boyfriend brought up on some trumped up charges personally endorsed by the minister himself." Umbridge called out with one last threat before the door slammed shut.

Second, was the intensity in her eyes as she began to piece together a particularly tricky puzzle with her prodigious intellect and work ethic to back it up. How was she going to hide this from Harry? She was certain he would go ballistic if he saw the end result of her detention, and while she would tell him eventually, telling him now would only cause more headaches and problems. As Umbridge had said earlier, even if Fudge was soon to be on his way out, he was still the most politically powerful individual in all of Wizarding Britain. While Hermione doubted Fudge would try a direct attack on Harry, she wouldn't discount the possibility and for that reason this incident had to remain secret from him.

Finally, in addition to her other emotions she felt more vulnerable at this moment than she had in a very long time. It was one thing she had prided herself upon since the troll incident in her first year. She was never left helpless in the face of danger; she had always given herself an out of some sort. Second year she had grabbed a mirror to protect her from the basilisk. Third year she had carried around the time turner which was a good fallback if something went seriously wrong. In the end it had saved her life, and Harry's, and eventually led to the freedom of Sirius and Buckbeak.

Last year she had been the one to help Harry find the answers in order to survive the Tri-wizard tournament, and caught Rita Skeeter, and she would not let this vile woman get the best of her now. Her brown eyes shone with determination and she walked into a little alcove to give herself a moment to gather her emotions before she had to deal with keeping Harry off of the scent for tonight at the very least.

She snorted lightly as she dabbed at her eyes and pulled the small compact mirror from her carrying bag to check her progress. Harry had never been what she would have considered observant in his first three years of school, but as he had told her before, he

reevaluated a lot during the summer after his third year. Having seen that glimpse of a better life with Sirius, he had altered his perspective and while it had been great to study with him and not need to pester him to do so, it was now going to make things much more difficult.

With a sigh she nodded to herself in the mirror before she snapped it shut and returned it to her bag. It was Showtime and she had to make a good performance.

Approaching the Fat Lady's portrait Hermione smiled slightly as she uttered, "Pride of the Lions."

The Fat Lady nodded and said, "Of course it is dear, have a good night."

The portrait door swung open revealing the bustling common room of Gryffindor house, with several of the older students piled around the front two couches near the currently dormant fireplace. Harry, Ginny, Ron and Lavender were in the far right corner of the room, and it appeared that Harry was the only one doing homework as Lavender watched Ron and Ginny play some chess.

As though he could sense her presence Harry glanced up and gave her a weary smile before he softly asked, "How was detention with the b-witch?"

Hermione grinned as she plopped down in Harry's lap, waiting for Harry to pull his book and parchment up before she replied, "It was fine, she had me do some lines about not lying. But, in the grand scheme of things it wasn't bad. Unlike some people I know, I don't get a new detention every other week."

Harry arched his eyebrow and poked his tongue out before he began to tickle Hermione's sides in a maneuver which was most definitely unbecoming for a prefect. So caught up was he in the giggles and laughed protest from her, he never noticed the grimace that lit up her face as he grazed the back of her right hand. However, one set of eyes did catch the look of pain and the witch silently made a note to bring it up later when they were alone.

By the time Harry and Hermione had settled down he idly glanced down at his robes and noticed a speck of blood. Frowning he spoke, "When did I get blood on my robes? Did I hurt you?" he finished in a concerned whisper as his eyes bored into hers.

Hermione quickly answered in a slightly high pitched voice, "You probably got it when you were mixing salamander blood into your potion during class today. Remember I told you to be careful with it because it stains horribly."

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment before he shrugged. "I suppose it's possible; good thing Snape didn't take points off for wasting ingredients or some such nonsense."

Hermione laughed softly. "He seems to be in a much better mood so far this year, so I doubt he would take points for something as silly as that."

Ron snorted. "Nice for Snape is horrid for normal people Herms."

Hermione snapped, "Don't call me Herms, or I'll be forced to call you Billius..."

Lavender's eyes shot up from the latest edition of Teen Witch Weekly as she asked, "Billius?"

Ron's ears went red as he muttered, "It's my middle name."

Lavender giggled before she consoled, "It really could be a lot worse Ronnie."

Ron sighed before Lavender gave him a quick peck on the cheek in consolation, which seemed to lift his spirits from the sulking mood he was about to enter. Hermione and Ginny shared a look, where a brief conversation took place before talk shifted to Neville's whereabouts and the happenings in class for the day.

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Hermione finally managed to get away by around nine, begging off with the excuse of keeping ahead on sleep to avoid a repeat of third year. It had been a convincing lie and one that Harry couldn't really find any fault in as he retired to his own dorm to rest after the longest day of the week.

Hermione snuck into the bathroom, which was fortunately empty, as she squeezed her tube of murtlap essence and began to rub the soothing slave into the cuts on the back of her hand. As she watched the cuts slowly close up a voice called out, "You didn't actually write lines in detention, did you?"

Hermione glanced up into the bathroom mirror and sighed at the sight of Ginny looking at her wounded hand with a skeptical expression on her face.

Glancing around, she pulled her wand from her pocket and cast silencing charms around the bathroom before she answered, "Professor Umbridge did have me write lines. But, instead of using a regular quill I used a blood quill."

Ginny's eyes opened wider as she sputtered, "A blood quill? But those are extremely illegal. My dad found some muggle pens charmed the same and the wizard with them went to Azkaban." She paused for a moment before she added, "You have to tell someone Hermione."

Hermione frowned and shook her head forcefully in the negative before she said, "We can't Ginny. One, if Harry finds out he is going to go ballistic and probably get expelled from school for attacking a professor. Also, Umbridge is the Senior Undersecretary of the Minister and they are not going to believe a muggleborn witch's word over hers."

Ginny frowned noticeably before she deflated and asked, "So you're going to let her get away with this?"

Hermione shook her head again, "No, she won't get away with this. But I am going to deal with this in my own way. I promise I'll tell Harry,

but I need to do it in the proper way or it might get ugly. Promise me you won't do or say anything Ginny."

Ginny sighed heavily before she mumbled, "I promise."

Hermione nodded after she gazed at her friend, seemingly measuring the sincerity of her words before she spoke, "Fine, now I have a feeling you wanted to talk about something else. Let's get back to my room and we can chat without worrying if someone wanders in that we don't want hearing what we have to say."

Ginny nodded as she padded behind Hermione into the fifth year girls dorm as they could hear the chatter of Lavender and Parvati inside of the cocoon that was Lavender's bed.

Hermione smiled blandly as she stripped down out of her clothes and Crookshanks began to purr as Ginny rubbed him behind his ears. Pulling on a baggy pair of sweat pants, Hermione grabbed a hair tie and pulled her mane back into a loose ponytail before she pulled on the POTTER jersey she had gotten at the Quidditch World Cup from the year before.

Ginny smiled as Hermione slid next to her and then closed the hangings around her bed before she flicked her wand ensuring their privacy. Tucking her legs into a lotus position she smiled back and asked, "What's up?"

Ginny pulled a pillow from the head of the bed and lay down. Using it as a prop, she rested on her side looking up into Hermione's eyes as she said, "I just wanted to talk about stuff, and not the kind of stuff we talk about in the common room."

Hermione beckoned Crookshanks and the ginger haired cat-kneazle breed crawled up into her lap purring as she asked, "How are things with Neville going?"

Ginny frowned thoughtfully before she sighed and threw her hands up in the air. "Sometimes I think everything is fine, and then sometimes I get this feeling like we are missing some sort of spark between us."

The snogging is fine, but sometimes it's just kind of flat. What about the snogging between you and Harry?"

Hermione smiled serenely, "The thing with us is that we don't need a spark, we can just be and still make things work. We just have this unbelievable comfort level between us. When we kiss I don't have to worry about being embarrassed if I try something new and he doesn't like it...or he likes it too much. We've done a little bit of petting, and I think it has been fun and if Harry's face is any judge he has liked it too."

Ginny smirked and said, "Well of course he would, even the great Harry Potter is susceptible to the wiles of a beautiful and intelligent witch."

Hermione waved the compliment away and asked in a conspiratorial whisper, "How are things with Ron and Lavender going? I mean I saw that they've been sitting together during class and meals, but what does that mean exactly?"

Ginny giggled. "Well he did ask her to the Hogsmeade weekend and she accepted. I think Ron is trying to emulate a lot of what Harry does with you."

Hermione frowned. "But why would he do that?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "He's Ron, if he can find a way to actually do something without learning how and why he should do it, then he will. He always has been rather lazy, but smart enough to get by when he needed to."

Hermione sighed. "You're right, he would do just barely enough to pass or succeed without wasting any energy. Of course, that's also why Harry was named a prefect instead of him, and if Harry wants it he'll have the Quidditch captaincy next year."

Ginny poked her tongue out. "As much as I adore Harry, I really don't want to talk about him right now. Let's focus on my doofus brother, and what his officially being with Lavender might actually be like now that we've seen them in action."

Hermione shrugged. "Ginny, we can't hold his hand on this forever and frankly he needs to learn some things all by himself."

Ginny frowned and sat up squeezing the pillow to her chest. "I-I know but I don't like seeing Ron get hurt if I can help it."

Hermione sighed. "It's how you learn Ginny, and while I love your mother to bits she has this tendency to not let her kids, you two especially, make any mistakes or learn from them. Did you know that if you help a butterfly out of its cocoon it will die?"

Ginny blinked. "What?"

Hermione explained slowly, "If you help a butterfly out of its cocoon before it emerges, its wings will never fill with the fluid that allows it to fly and live properly. The struggle of learning for yourself is one of the things everyone who grows up has to deal with. If you and your mum keep helping Ron out of his cocoon beyond offering him words of encouragement then he will never learn to live as himself, but as a combination of you and your mother. I'm through forcing Ron to do anything; it's time to see what he can do on his own terms. I'll help him if he asks or if I see he absolutely needs it, but I won't force my beliefs and solutions onto him any more."

Ginny slumped her shoulders in defeat before she fished for a change of topic. "How are your OWL classes looking after the first day of class?"

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "Well everything today looks like it should be manageable, aside from Defense anyways. I think we might need to form a club to practice practical application for that class." Pausing she furrowed her brow, "Ginny, when do you have Defense?"

Ginny rubbed her neck in thought before she finally answered, "I have double Defense on Wednesday."

Hermione nodded. "I'll talk to Harry; he probably wouldn't mind meeting once every couple of weeks to lead a study group. Maybe he could even teach everyone the patronus spell; I bet that would be a nice chance to get some extra credit on the defense OWL." Her eyes had lit taken on a slightly manic gleam at the opportunity to learn defense spells from Harry, who had been lucky enough to get tips from a master like Mad-Eye Moody the previous year. While their training hadn't gone beyond the Occlumency during the summer, Hermione had seen memories of the most intensive training the grizzled auror had given to Harry.

Ginny noticed Hermione in full blown academic mode and smiled softly. "Ok girl, I am going to catch up on some beauty sleep. You try to do the same Mrs. Potter."

Hermione crinkled her nose up. "I love Harry, and we might be betrothed in a manner of speaking, but I think the Mrs. Potter jokes are a little bit early."

Ginny simply laughed and gave the older witch a conspiratorial wink as she padded out of the room as Hermione sputtered in disbelief and obligatory outrage.

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The twilight panther stealthily crept along in the dark corners of Hogwarts, occasionally disappearing and reappearing short distances away. Harry had a bit of a plan to pay Delores Umbridge back. He may have appeared oblivious to Hermione's injury, but he certainly wasn't foolish, vengeful definitely, but no he wasn't foolish. Here he was two days later, seeking out his own personal measure of retribution for the girl he had pledged himself to, and had since he had saved her from a troll almost four years earlier.

Therefore he found himself stalking the halls on a weekday night as he tried to find something he could use to incriminate the witch that had hurt Hermione. In his mind, life was filled with this simple rule, you hurt him he would make sure you are sorry. You hurt Hermione or anyone else he considered family, then he would make your life was a living hell.

Finally he reached the professor's quarters and silently transformed back into his human form, the Marauder's Map already in his hand. With a quietly murmured password, "Mischief Multiplied", the map went into a 'security' mode that Sirius had informed him of during the summer. This would highlight and indicate any and all wards designed to detect another witch or wizard and record it.

Harry scanned the map and found his quarry, Delores Umbridge's personal quarters, a place not for the faint hearted.

Stealthily Harry shifted back into his panther form before he melted into a shadow just as Professor McGonagall came rushing out into the hall in her pajamas and bellowed, "I know you're out here whoever you are, and when I find you; you will be serving detention with me."

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Harry cautiously stepped out of a shadow in the corner of Umbridge's room; the map had indicated no wards present and luckily enough no Umbridge was present either. Slowly he walked out of her bedroom and into the little office she had set up near the entrance of her quarters. Harry had to stifle his gag reflex as a picture of Fudge – in less clothing than he should ever be in, including the times when he invariably washed – was sitting on the desk.

After carefully and wandlessly levitating a few papers he came upon the jackpot he was seeking, a piece of parchment with a timeline which was labeled, "Ministry Procedural Orders for Educational Decrees and Seizure of Control at Hogwarts."

Harry frowned as he skimmed the parchment before he cast a quick duplication charm on it as he heard a voice outside of the door, a few scant feet away. Tucking the duplicate away he waved his hand and watched as all of the papers returned to their original places. While he wasn't accomplished at wandless magic, he could use it for little things like levitating light objects in a pinch.

Shifting back to his panther form Harry disappeared into the shadows just as the door unlocked revealing Umbridge. Her beady eyes shifted to some movement in the far corner of the room, but when she spotted nothing she wrote it off to nerves before she began to prepare for bed.

Mumbling to herself she muttered, "I swear if I didn't love Cornelius as much as I do..."

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It was Friday evening at the end of a long first week back for the term, which coincidentally meant that the annual staff meeting to discuss any potential problems with the schedule or problems with any of the students.

"Filius, I swear to Merlin it is the same with you every year. Each year you promise your Ravenclaws will be atop the house points by the end of the year, and each year you are disappointed," Professor McGonagall teased her colleague as the assorted staff members of Hogwarts were gathered for a staff meeting.

"Pish Posh Minerva, I merely stated that my Ravenclaws have a chance this year barring any of the insane stunts your Gryffindors are so synonymous with, or the cunning rule twisting Severus' Slytherins are known for," Flitwick stated with a small smirk which seemed to fit the diminutive professor perfectly.

Severus Snape, in a very relaxed state, glanced over at Dumbledore before he inserted with a smirk of his own, "While I have supreme confidence in my Slytherins, I am willing to make a wager on the Quidditch Cup if there are any takers."

Professor Pomona Sprout was the first to chime in. "Oh Cedric has ensured a Quidditch Cup here in his last year. I'd be willing to put 100 galleons on it."

As the four respective heads of the houses bantered about each of their teams' respective chances of winning the Quidditch Cup

Dumbledore was watching Professor Umbridge calmly, but in a very calculating manner.

Finally Dumbledore softly interjected, "While I enjoy a little friendly rivalry as much as the next, I am afraid any wagers will not be allowed in my presence."

All of the professors managed to portray abashed looks, but they had caught the subtle context the wily older wizard had framed his statement in.

Umbridge cleared her throat; Dumbledore hadn't been the only one closely observing the proceedings. "I quite agree Headmaster. I do believe this meeting was called to collaborate on how classes have proceeded for the first week."

Dumbledore smiled ingratiatingly at his Ministry appointed Defense instructor before he opened the floor. "Very well Delores, why don't you start with a summary of your classes for the week."

Umbridge nodded. "Well I have to admit to being somewhat confused and perplexed as to the distribution of grades that Professor Moody supplied for me."

Dumbledore's beard crinkled imperceptibly before he dutifully rose to the bait. "How so Delores?"

Umbridge tilted her head up slightly. "Moody indicated that Potter and Granger were at the top of the class and his dueling club. Yet during my first class Granger was insubordinate and spewing vicious lies about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, while Potter never volunteered an answer once."

Professor Sprout frowned thoughtfully. "I'm sorry Delores but that doesn't sound like Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger at all. Ms. Granger has always been a very respectful and intelligent member of my class. Potter has been much improved in that regard during the last year also."

Umbridge snarled, "Merciful Merlin, I see the staff at Hogwarts have fallen for all of the tripe they print about the golden boy. He is merely a creation of celebrity starved idiots who needed a hero to explain the downfall of the most powerful dark lord in centuries."

It was in that moment that Delores Umbridge thought she had committed suicide as at least a dozen sets of eyes seemed to measure her very existence. Finally Professor McGonagall spoke in a low but deathly cold voice, "That boy has seen more evil and dealt with more pain than you could ever possibly imagine, and unlike you he has stood up to this pain and conquered it. It's little political peons like you that have caused the death of numerous good people like Harry's parents. You all criticize Voldemort's methods but secretly you agree with his assessment of our world. You, you vile..." McGonagall trailed off into silence thinking her point had been made admirably, even if it lacked most of her usual tact.

The other professors seemed to be wearing a varying assortment on looks of shock, some were somewhat amused by the dressing down of their new colleague, and some were mildly disapproving thinking some things were better left unsaid. Snape was still wearing that damnable smirk that was quickly becoming associated with the greasy hair potions master much like his sneer used to be.

Flitwick spoke with an arched eyebrow, "What Professor McGonagall meant to say was, that as an educator such bias is completely unacceptable here at Hogwarts. Unfortunately, unlike the rest of us she has a more vested interest in Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger and reacted accordingly. I believe the comparison of a mother bear protecting her cubs is very apt here. You will find every professor's priority is to provide an education here in a safe and unbiased environment."

There were murmurs of agreement from the rest of the professors, and the meeting more or less returned to some semblance of normalcy after a few more tense moments. One thing was absolutely certain though – to those in the staff that were in disbelief after the headmaster's initial warnings about the Defense instructor, the meeting had laid those doubts to rest.

For Delores Umbridge however, she merely noted those in the staff she thought she could trust or coerce in the coming days and those that she would have to shunt aside like she would Dumbledore.

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It was a relatively new experience for Harry to watch formal tryouts for the Quidditch team, considering his first three years of Quidditch had consisted of the exact same players on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Now the only captain he had ever known in Oliver Wood was gone, and they were adding a fourth chaser to the roster to have someone else with experience in the coming years when Angelina and Alicia graduated at the end of the term.

"Harry, what exactly are you supposed to be doing today?" Hermione queried her boyfriend as he hovered in the air next to her seat in the Gryffindor stands of the Quidditch pitch. There was this indefinable tension that had been brewing between them ever since Hermione's run in with the blood quill, and Harry's retaliatory trip to Umbridge's office, the contents of the trip which still remained a secret to all but the raven haired wizard who had been there.

Harry shrugged. "Angelina told me that I was supposed to help supervise like every other member of the team. Why, is this boring you? You can always leave if you want to; I mean I didn't ask you to come and waste your day."

Hermione huffed in annoyance. "I know you didn't ask Harry, but it's important to you and I want to support you."

Harry merely nodded in response, "Thank you."

The response seemed to catch Hermione off guard for a fleeting moment. She had expected their little tiff to continue and Harry's polite response had her searching for a suitable answer. "Like I said Harry, if it matters to you it matters to me. I mean I've been to every single one of your Quidditch games and a vast majority of your practices."

Harry managed a small smile as he gazed down at the chaser try-outs. They were down to the last two prospects and it appeared that Ginny would be the one to make the team. Turning on his Firebolt slowly Harry shifted his eyes to Hermione and Lavender watching the action from the stands. Hermione was dressed in full muggle attire as she wore a pair of khaki shorts that showed off her nice legs and a Gryffindor t-shirt emblazoned with the phrase 'I like my seekers with Black Hair and Green Eyes.' It had been one of Hermione's little projects, trying to find a way to create custom t-shirts to combine her muggle upbringing with her magical life she lived nowadays.

Finally he acknowledged to himself it was time to come clean with her following practice. He didn't care if she was insulting him by keeping her secrets, he would end the petty cycle before it got any worse. He softly said, "I'm sorry I've never appreciated you as much as I should have."

Before Hermione could proffer a response to Harry's heartfelt statement he zipped down towards the ground to join the rest of the team in greeting their newest team member at the conclusion of the chaser try-outs. Frowning she glanced over at Lavender who smiled slightly and asked, "Problems in paradise?"

Hermione sighed heavily leaning against the support post at the top of the stands before she sighed, "I...don't really know. But I do know that keeping secrets in a relationship is never a good thing, and of course that's what I start off doing the first week of the term."

Lavender's eyes lit up at Hermione's use of the word secret; it was commonly known that Lavender and Parvati were two of the biggest gossip mongers of the school. However, it had also come as no surprise to anyone in the know that the gossips of the school never had any measure of the full truth when dealing with the golden trio of Gryffindor house.

As slyly as she possibly could Lavender spoke, "You know Hermione, it might help to have another girl's opinion on what your secret is before you tell it to Harry."

Hermione stifled the obligatory sigh and rolling of her eyes at such a common tactic used by Lavender. Knowing that the blonde was the girlfriend of one of her best friends she would need more tact. "I appreciate the offer Lav, but I think I already know how Harry is going to react."

Lavender looked disappointedly at the bushy-haired witch, whose eyes had focused back down on the field where Angelina briefly amplified her voice using Sonorus and announced, "Ginny Weasley has won the reserve chaser position. Thank you to all of you that came to try out. Those that are here for the starting keeper try out please line up over by the far left scoring post with your brooms."

Canceling the spell, Angelina grabbed Ginny around the shoulder and led her towards Katie and Alicia. Harry had zipped towards the twins over by the posts and he grinned at them before he asked, "So, how are we going to be scoring our contestants for the starting keeper position?"

Fred grinned, "Originally we wanted to shoot off fireworks while they tried to save shots ..."

George continued, "... but Angelina wasn't very happy with that plan so she told us ..."

"... if we valued our brooms or our broomsticks literally or euphemistically ..."

"... then we should just have the chasers take shots at the prospective players ..."

"... and judge who the best is based upon technique and results."

"So of course we agreed, because while we may be pranksters we are not blind to threats to one of our best qualities."

Harry laughed. "I think I get the point guys." Furrowing his brow he said, "I am going to take my spot about one hundred and fifty feet up in the air. I'll keep an eye on things from above, you two keep an eye on things from closer to the ground."

Fred and George saluted Harry with mock solemnity as he zipped into the air with a grin on his face at their usual antics.

He took a moment to glance over at the stands to take a look at Hermione. He hated arguing with her over stuff like this. When he argued with Ron he could always see a quick and easy resolution, but when he argued with Hermione it was often like stepping through a minefield in clown shoes.

.....

Ron's hands were beyond clammy, and this was his chance to be something that no one else in his family had been. With trembling hands he pulled his keeper gloves on slowly as a seventh year took to the hoops for his try out. Taking deep but tremulous breaths Ron tried to picture himself succeeding when a tap at his shoulder broke his momentary concentration. He turned with a grimace and there stood Luna Lovegood with a mysterious smile on her face.

"Hello Ronald, the wrackspurts and nargles are out today so I thought you could use a good luck kiss." She stated dreamily but with a faint blush on her cheeks.

Ron blinked. "That's erm sweet Luna, but I have a girlfriend and I doubt she'd like that."

Luna waved his objection away. "I never said I was going to snog you, just a good luck kiss on the cheek."

Ron nodded slowly and Luan's dreamy face lit up into a smile that was beautiful in its own quirky way. She leaned in and kissed him gently on the cheek before she whispered into his ear, "I believe in you Ronald."

Ron suddenly felt all of the tension and nerves in his body melt away leaving only his confidence and a goofy smile on his face. If he had glanced up to the stands he would have seen Lavender's face purple and Hermione give the scene a thoughtful look.

Luna then pulled away and with an aloof smile said, "I'm going to look for some thunderbellied salamanders by the lake, you're welcome to join me after you get the keeper position."

Ron heard Fred's voice call out, "Cormac McLaggen!"

McLaggen, a tall wiry haired wizard in his sixth year resembled Wood in a lot of ways, strutted out to the pitch before he climbed up on his new Comet 290 before he zipped up into the air surrounding the rings.

Ron rubbed his hands over the length of his Cleansweep 11 he had gotten as a birthday present from Harry and Hermione the previous year. Luna confused him in ways he was certain weren't possible after a full week of learning about girls with Lavender. She excited in ways that Lavender never really had. Sure Lavender was a pretty girl with a nice body, but she had never really challenged him in the ways Luna already had in a matter of a week.

Ron still vaguely remembered that Luna used to visit the Burrow somewhat regularly back when he and Ginny were younger, but that had all stopped one day and all his mum had tearfully told the two of them was the Luna's mum had moved on to a better place. Suddenly seven years of maturity snapped into place and he understood that Luna had lost her mother at an early age. Just as he was about to puzzle out the varying feelings that simple conclusion had led him to George called out, "Ickle Ronniekins!"

Ron refused to let the twins get a rise out of him now, this was too important so he walked with a quiet confidence onto the pitch. It was now or never.

A/N: Next chapter will be a continuation of this one, including the conversation between Harry and Hermione, Ron's fate in his try out, Umbridge begins to take steps, and Voldemort shows he isn't sitting idly by.

Thanks to everyone that has continued to read and thanks to everyone who has taken the time to review.

Question of the Chapter:

What is more important to a reader of the Harry Potter books for the upcoming finale in DH: Shipping, who lives and who dies, or just simply how well written the end of Harry's journey is?

The Room of Requirement had not seen a lot of use since Remus had enlightened everyone as to its existence the morning before the third task. While muggles had never set foot into the enchanted room before that day, generations of resourceful and observant witches and wizards had used the room for a variety of purposes.

Some had simply used it as a quiet place to study, while the vast majority used it to aid their love lives whether as a bordello of sorts or as a quiet place to snog and talk without doing so in a broom closet. In a manner of speaking, that was exactly what Harry was doing as he led Hermione into the room to clear the air after a week of stilted silences and awkward embraces.

The Room was shifted into a very plain setting, with a couch and an enchanted window that revealed a full moon outside. It was a sign of Harry's distracted mood that he didn't even know that tonight was one where Remus would be forced to transform. Releasing his hand from Hermione's grip he began to pace agitatedly in an erratic pattern.

Hermione frowned absently at the room Harry had required before she softly suggested, "Harry, don't you think we should sit down?"

Harry glanced over at her and blinked before he nodded, taking her offered hand as she led the both of them over to the couch before they both sat down, Hermione with her legs tucked beneath her, and Harry with an arm wrapped around her as he sat sprawled next to her.

Gazing out of the enchanted window the room had provided Harry muttered, "Why do things always have to be so bloody complicated?"

Hermione stiffened ever so slightly; she had been enjoying the feel of Harry's arm around her. For the first time in a week some comfort from Harry was uncolored by the guilt of holding on to a secret. She had never told him about the time turner either, but that hadn't seemed so much a secret as a privilege she couldn't reveal for fear of losing it.

Harry went on, not acknowledging that Hermione had stiffened in his arms. "Merlin, I know this is partially my fault. I know that I've given you reason to think that I will jump off of the handle and act rashly in

the past, but I thought I'd shown you over the past year that I've gotten better at avoiding those situations. You need to trust me just like I thought I could trust you before this. I think I've earned at least that much from you, haven't I?"

Hermione swallowed the sudden lump in her throat before she answered in a slightly quavering voice, "Oh Harry, I didn't tell you because yes I was worried about how you'd react, but not because you might be hasty or rash. I didn't tell you because I wanted to protect you from Umbridge, just like you would do for me if our positions had been reversed."

Harry raised his eyes to meet hers in some sort of a silent protest but Hermione cut him off firmly, her voice sounding much more strong and confident. "She's here for the sole reason of ruining the good name of both you and Dumbledore, Harry. Right now, you two are the only thing that is stopping Fudge and his group from making a hostile move for the entire Ministry. Now this is all conjecture, but how would you deal with an enemy that you can't physically defeat?"

Harry closed his eyes and sighed heavily. While Hermione had raised some good points, points he already had known about due to the copied timeline he had filched from Umbridge's office, she had sidestepped the real reason for their 'talk'.

Sliding his glasses down to the tip of his nose Harry rubbed at his eyes tiredly before he exhaled deeply and murmured in such a tender voice that it shocked Hermione. "I want to; no I need to have you with me Hermione. You're my reminder of why what I am doing is the right thing. If you're hurt, don't you think I should have the right to worry about you and protect you if I can?"

Hermione bit her lip; she was touched deeply by Harry's words and instead of answering she merely buried her face into his chest and squeezed his body to hers tightly. A couple of tears escaped her tightly closed eyes and slowly soaked into Harry's blue t-shirt.

Harry completely removed his glasses and sat them on the small stand the room had provided for just such a situation as he buried his face into Hermione's mane of bushy hair and simply contented

himself with holding her and enjoying the feel of offering her comfort for once.

While Harry would typically be thinking of other things than comfort when he held Hermione's soft and warm body in his arms, he was amazed by how much he could be moved emotionally by the small but wonderful creature in his embrace. Having grown up with the Dursleys, he was still unaccustomed to such open displays of affection that had nothing to do with hormones and mild flirting, as had been most of their contact the previous year, at least on his part.

Time lost all meaning while the pair was lost in sharing some of the raw emotion that had been dividing them during the course of the week. After several long minutes Hermione pulled away and with a pleading look that begged forgiveness said, "I'm sorry Harry."

Harry merely nodded, tenderly brushing some lingering tears from her face. "I reckon I have plenty to be apologizing for also. But I think I read somewhere that loving someone involves never having to apologize for being wrong, so you have a free pass from me. Just don't do it again," Harry teased Hermione gently as she tearfully hiccupped, taking his words as a resolution to the problem.

Hermione pulled away slightly, clasping her hands around Harry's neck but looking him directly in the eye. "Umbridge made me use a blood quill while I wrote lines. I used some murtlap essence to make sure the scarring wasn't too bad before I went to bed that night. She told me that she had friends in high places and anything I said wouldn't stick. So, that's when I decided it wouldn't help any to tell you what happened."

Harry shook his head slightly, but decided not to follow that ultimately fruitless train of thought. "Ok, but if we can't talk to each other about these kinds of things, we are going to have problems in the future."

Hermione sniffed once and nodded, "I really am sorry Harry, and I can completely understand your point." Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she asked after a moment's pause that seemed to finally clear the air, "You said you had something to tell me earlier, didn't you?"

Harry nodded and he gently pried Hermione's arms from around his neck before he reached into one of the large pockets in his baggy cargo pants. As he pulled the large piece of parchment from his pocket Hermione noted two things immediately. "You copied a parchment from somewhere, but how did you get the parchment to be so solid? The duplicating charm is notorious for its short shelf life."

Harry grinned slightly. "Well, with the little bit you've taught me about Arithmancy and spell creation I managed to alter the spell to give a slightly more permanent shelf life. Frankly, I'm surprised no one else has thought to change it. Of course probably everyone who dabbles in spell creation is some Arithmantic genius and they overlook simple solutions for the more complicated ones. "

Hermione arched her eyebrow. Several questions were dancing in her eyes but curiosity finally won out as she pointed to the parchment in Harry's hand. "Ok I give, what is that a copy of?"

Harry favored her with a mischievous grin as he waved the parchment about. "This is a copy of a timeline I filched from Professor Umbridge's office. It also outlines the procedure for how and when Umbridge will lead a Ministry delegation in taking over Hogwarts."

Hermione's eyes were wide as saucers as she took in this little revelation. She had assumed Umbridge was around to sully Harry and Professor Dumbledore's names, but not to take the entire school over.

Wordlessly she requested the parchment which Harry handed over without any protest. While he had already planned some counter strikes, Hermione's forms of revenge when enacted were much more devious than the forms he could typically think of.

Idly she twirled a curl of her honey brown bushy mane of hair as she read through the parchment slowly as though to take in every little piece of minutiae she could. After about twenty minutes she finished and with a smirk said, "I always wondered how stupid the bad guys could be when I watched cartoons growing up; leaving their plans to be easily exposed seemed like such a stupid thing to do." She

quirked her eyebrow as she gazed into Harry's eyes. "I have some plans that we need to put into motion first thing tomorrow."

Harry glanced down at his watch. It was still reasonably early and he asked, "Why tomorrow?"

Hermione's look became sultry as she said, "Well I really wanted to snog my boyfriend's brains out, and maybe get a good cuddle in too."

Harry's eyes danced with laughter as he said, "Oh so one giant brain wasn't enough for you, now you have to have my smaller one too?"

Hermione grinned and like her animagus form she pounced on her raven haired boyfriend. She intended to show him just how much she had missed being with him for the past week.

.....

Ron sat and watched the party go on around him, Lavender had been hanging off of him ever since he had been named to the Quidditch team. While he enjoyed the attention he didn't particularly care for how clingy she was acting. She made him feel like some sort of a possession, and there might have been a time where a younger Ron Weasley might have enjoyed that a bit more.

He was broken from his strange thoughts as Fred shoved a butterbeer into his hands and jovially said, "Welcome to the team little bro, and just remember you earn your keep here on the Quidditch team, so no slacking for you."

Ron nodded slightly, a crooked smile on his face as he thought back to his try out. It had been rather perfect, and he was still surprised at how well he had performed under pressure. Performing under pressure had always been Harry's thing, and yet he had managed to save all five shots he faced using a variety of moves he had been practicing in his last couple of weeks at the Burrow.

In the end he had saved a tough shot using a sloth roll, and then he had still only managed to tie for the position with the McLaggen bloke who went right before he had. In the end the twins and Harry had

decided to offer the both of them a spot on the team with individual practice performances deciding who started for any of the games.

While his two best friends had disappeared to have one of those relationship 'talks' that still made Ron shudder with dread simply when he thought about them, they both had congratulated him before disappearing to give him his moment in the sun free of their distraction, which existed simply by their presence in a room.

Lavender leaned in and gave him a lingering kiss, her tongue darting into his mouth for a fleeting moment before she murmured, "Congratulations Ronnie."

Ron grinned slightly. Lavender was a very nice little distraction, but he was beginning to think after less than a week of being her boyfriend that a distraction was all she was going to be. Still he mused, snogging a pretty girl for any length of time was exactly the kind of distraction he liked having to deal with.

As he pondered distractions he began to think about Luna Lovegood and the strange effect she had on him before his try out, especially the feel of her soft and warm lips against his cheek. Lavender thought his slightly dreamy smile had to do with the kiss she had given him, so she wasn't aware her boyfriend was pondering his feelings for another girl.

.....

Cho Chang was not your typical Ravenclaw. While she was indeed very bright she did not center her very existence on knowledge and books. No, Cho's intelligence was more centered in on social and political forums, a by product of her father being the magical ambassador in Britain to the Japanese and Chinese Ministries.

While she grew up in and amongst the rarified air of the political elite she had always been a bit of a tomboy growing up, preferring the company of boys to other girls of her age. Of course few of her present friends at Hogwarts would believe that Cho Chang the social queen of Hogwarts was at one time a social outcast. Cho knew which people to make as allies and which ones to make into enemies. It had

come as a surprise to her, as someone outside of Gryffindor house, just how formidable Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were, both magically and in terms of personality.

She was well aware that Potter had at one time harbored a small crush on her, and she had been prepared to use it in order to further her own standing following life at Hogwarts. Now that Potter had found and was purportedly betrothed to Granger she had wisely killed any such ambitions and did so gladly considering her relationship with Cedric Diggory.

She smiled to herself at the thought of Cedric as she watched Marietta began to pick on Loony Lovegood. The girl was pretty but so unbearably strange that even the guys would take their turns mocking her strange behavior and clothing. While it occasionally made her feel uncomfortable, one didn't become popular without having to break a few eggs.

Shaking her head as she wondered why thoughts of Loony Lovegood had reached the surface, she listened in as a pair of fourth years were talking animatedly only a couple of feet away.

"I tell you my mum is Fudge's secretary, and she said that Dumbledore is going to be replaced by Professor Umbridge as headmaster before the month is out."

"There is no way Dumbledore is going to be replaced; even Fudge isn't that desperate to be kicked out of office. You've heard the rumors about You-Know-Who being back. Dumbledore is probably the only reason that the school hasn't been attacked yet."

The first voice went dreamy. "Don't forget about Harry, he was the one that defeated him the first time you know."

The other girl snorted. "Just because he said hello to you one day in the hall, it doesn't mean you are on a first name basis with him."

Cho ignored the rest of the conversation as her mind was spinning about Umbridge potentially taking over Dumbledore's position at the school.

She had people she needed to talk to, because while she might have been a power at the school, she had no influence beyond that. She would talk to Cedric, who could relay the message to Potter without it seeming suspicious. After that her hands were tied; she wasn't a true force magically and would have to rely on others to do the fighting for her. A letter to her father was in order, and this time it would be written in Japanese to ensure no prying eyes could decipher its message.

.....

The next week started inconspicuously enough as two Gryffindors in particular kept their heads low as they coasted through another of Umbridge's non-lessons. The professors that did insist on actually performing their given professions and actively teaching were already piling up the work load on the fifth and seventh years in preparation for the OWL and NEWT examinations.

It was Friday night when the true excitement for the year finally struck Hogwarts, in particular its most famous student.

Monday night they had both visited Dumbledore and they were not terribly surprised that the older wizard was already well aware of the plans that had been cooked up by Fudge and his goons.

Harry and Hermione were finishing up their prefect rounds, their comfort level having been completely restored as they both worked tirelessly on preparations for if Umbridge's plan actually came to fruition.

As they were heading to the astronomy tower to see if any lovebirds had attempted to sneak in and have a quick snogging session Harry's scar flared up for the first time in a few weeks. While his Occlumency kept the brunt of the pain from seeping into his consciousness it was still painful enough to drop him to his knees. However, this was something Voldemort wanted Harry to see, and despite his Occlumency skills the forced vision overpowered him

Hermione was nearly tugged to the ground as Harry had dropped to his knees. She quickly took his face in her hands and began to caress his head gently in an attempt to alleviate some of the pain.

As a finger brushed Harry's familiar lightning bolt scar she felt a strange feeling wash over her, as though an emotion that originated from somewhere else fought for dominance in her mind briefly. She felt it long enough to know it was a flicker of some perverse glee, most likely from Voldemort about some triumph somewhere.

Harry meanwhile was also treated to a brief glance at Voldemort's source of happiness as several scraggly looking people bowed to him on an island where a fortress lay on rocks.

As the crushing realization that Voldemort had broken followers out of Azkaban hit him he opened his eyes to see concerned brown ones gazing directly back at him, and when the pain was no longer bearable he mumbled, "V-voldemort at Azkaban, tell Dumble-..." As though he was a puppet with the strings cut from him Harry slumped to the ground unconscious, as blood trailed down his face from his scar.

The quiet of the castle was broken as Hermione screamed for help. Lord Voldemort had announced his grand return to the wizarding world, and the rest of the world was soon to be in for in for a rude awakening.

.....

Two weeks – two weeks was all it had really taken for Harry Potter to be embroiled in another year filled with drama and mayhem. Not that it was ever really his fault. Having a homicidal dark wizard after him, well it tended to make Harry a bit of a magnet for trouble.

Albus Dumbledore was perched in a chair in the hospital wing, as was his standard course of action whenever a student, regardless of their house affiliation, was seriously injured while at Hogwarts. As it so happened, Harry and his friends just seemed to be injured more than all other students in the rest of the school combined.

This time however, it was one of those unpreventable things that had befallen the bespectacled teenager before him. It was true he had other responsibilities in the wake of a mass breakout at Azkaban prison, a place long thought to be impervious from outside attacks, but he needed to have some suspicions confirmed from Harry first and foremost.

He smiled as Harry finally began to stir. His companion Ms. Granger was immediately alerted to the slightest movement from the bed and had quickly grasped his hand and watched hopefully. Madam Pomfrey had classified the malady as high magical and physical stress, and while she knew the specifics of Harry's condition she had no exact medical explanation for it.

Harry slowly blinked his eyes open and immediately Hermione slid his glasses on before he mumbled, "How long have I been out for?"

Hermione smiled gently. "Only about a day this time Harry." She frowned and added, "You know about the breakout then?"

Harry still looked exhausted as he replied, "Yeah, I saw Voldemort torturing and killing one of the guards before he broke into the cell of a woman he called Bella and he freed her." Harry couldn't suppress a shudder at the memory of the emaciated woman whose eyes were full of insanity and malice.

Dumbledore took the chance to inject himself into the conversation, "Bella would be Bellatrix Lestrange. A cousin of Sirius's actually, but that is a story for another time I am afraid." Stepping into Harry's line of vision Dumbledore asked, "How are you feeling my boy?"

Harry grinned tiredly. "Like I've been run over by a lorry, but I doubt the Knight Bus makes stops in the middle of Hogwarts."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled mirthfully. "Alas the Knight Bus only comes as close as Hogsmeade to the school." The twinkle diminished slightly. "We have much to discuss Harry, but for now I am needed at the Ministry to smooth over some ruffled feathers by the public realization that Tom has indeed returned. I wished to

ensure you were fine before dealing with the interminable vagaries of politics."

Harry smiled gratefully before he glanced around. "Where are Sirius and Remus?"

Hermione answered, "They're on business for the Order. The headmaster wanted an Order presence to aid in the Azkaban clean up, and thankfully Madam Bones is passing it off as additional help. They both stopped by briefly to check in on you this morning, so don't worry about that. But Ronald couldn't be bothered because he is consoling Lavender with a thorough tonsil inspection. It seems the world is ending now that Voldemort is back."

Harry blinked before he replied, "If Ron is offering anyone comfort Hermione, then who are we to criticize it? I mean in my eyes this is a big step up for Ron, even if he is getting thoroughly snogged for his troubles."

Hermione sighed explosively before she shrugged apologetically. "You're right of course, but that boy just infuriates me so much."

Dumbledore grinned merrily at the exchange. "Ms. Granger, that is exactly what brothers have a tendency of doing. I assure you, that your response is quite typical as well." Turning to Harry he added, "Get well soon Harry, we have much to discuss in the coming weeks. Madam Pomfrey should release you after a check up this morning, most likely with a recommendation of a relaxing weekend."

Harry nodded and they both waved as the headmaster departed before he fully took in Hermione's appearance. She had bags under her eyes and her hair looked a fair bit more frizzy than normal; in all honesty she looked rather miserable. Gently he took her hand and asked, "It's Sunday morning right?"

Hermione nodded; absently she squeezed Harry's hand and he continued, "So I missed the Hogsmeade trip, and I'm guessing you haven't slept at all since I passed out." The statement being rhetorical he continued, "I'm touched that you've stayed up until I woke up, but

Hermione you need to get some sleep love. I'll have Ginny wake you up this afternoon so we can do some OWL review, ok?"

Hermione smiled tiredly and gave him a lingering kiss on the lips, "Well, ok but you had better be ready for the review then."

Harry grinned as he reached out to caress her cheek, a touch she leaned into. "Get some sleep, I'll be out of here soon and then we can relax this evening."

Hermione smiled softly before chancing one last kiss, and as Harry watched her leave his brow furrowed deep in thought. It was going to be hell in the coming days at Hogwarts. Between Voldemort and Umbridge Harry knew no one would get through it completely unscathed. It was time to start formulating a response to Umbridge, and it wasn't going to be a moment too soon.

.....

Azkaban prison was one of the harshest places in the world for anyone to live, or work, as was the case for a security contingent of 25 Aurors. Nymphadora Tonks was one of the lucky ones; her skills as a metamorphmagus made her exempt from the random lottery that was held every six months to determine the new patrol members throughout the Auror squad.

But that didn't mean she was immune from the clean up squad being used to investigate the depth of the breakout and how it was possible. The dementors hadn't reported any disturbances on their last patrol of the prison, and the four Aurors who had been stationed in the high security portion of the prison ... well they were still being scrubbed off of the walls.

Tonks gazed over across the courtyard and she spotted Sirius and Remus running some preliminary scans for magical residue throughout the prison.

Sighing heavily at her thoughts she noticed Dawlish walking in her general direction. She barely suppressed a grimace because it was a well known fact that he was one of Fudge's lackeys in the Aurors.

"Tonks, why in the bloody hell do we have a troublemaker like Black and that werewolf helping in the investigation?"

Tonks rolled her eyes, which Dawlish fortunately missed as she replied, "Those two are here on direct authorization from Madam Bones, Dale. Sirius was once an Auror, and Lupin has a mastery in Defense Against the Dark Arts. I'd say they are both aptly qualified to be here."

Dawlish grumbled, still eyeing the two marauders. "I still don't like it. Black is bad news and werewolves are evil to the core when push comes to shove. For all we know those two are sweeping away evidence that could link this to some of the unidentified Death Eaters that accompanied He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

Tonks merely nodded. Although she had heard both Remus and Sirius speak the dark lord's name before, but she still couldn't get over the mental block from twenty years of growing up in the wizarding world. Of course, seeing the blood, guts, and bone remains of multiple slain Aurors had reminded her of why she was told to fear the name in the first place.

Her father, a muggleborn wizard, had always compared Voldemort to German muggle Hitler, or at least if Hitler had been halted in the early stages of the war by some unexplainable muggle miracle. Now, she could see the wanton disregard for human life and while Voldemort operated on a much smaller scale it still made her blood run cold when she wondered what she would do if he ever came for her or someone she cared for.

Dawlish eyed her critically, well aware she was still mostly a rookie, albeit an attractive one, no light fact for a female in the Auror squads. Deciding to try his hand at comforting the shaken female he awkwardly patted her shoulder. "It's alright Tonks, you never get used to seeing this kind of stuff. But I can tell you that it helps if you have someone who can offer you some comfort."

Tonks narrowed her eyes at the lame pickup line; she had kept her official relationship with Remus a secret for obvious reasons of

discretion. While it never bothered her to be dating a known lycanthrope, it would damage her career and that was something Remus refused to let her do.

Likewise she had grown accustomed to the come-ons of the male Aurors both single and married as she answered airily, "I'll keep that in mind Dale."

Dawlish swaggered away, silently celebrating his apparent success as Tonks tried not to dwell on her thoughts of losing the people she loved in the war ahead. It was Dumbledore's words upon her admission into the Order that echoed in her mind. 'Do not dwell on the evils of this world Nymphadora. Instead dwell on the beautiful things so that when you are in the dark you shall have your light to find a way out.'

.....

Monday morning following his brief stay in the hospital wing, Harry and Hermione wandered down to the Great Hall for some breakfast before class. Dobby and Winky had saved the pair a trip to the great hall Sunday evening because as Dobby stated, "Harry Potter sir, is needing some food and sleep before classes."

The furor over Lord Voldemort's official return had been manageable in the Gryffindor common room, but neither was particularly hopeful that it would extend to the Great Hall.

Sure enough as soon as they entered a third year Hufflepuff girl with long red hair ran up to him and asked, "Harry, why did you let him come back?"

There might have been a time in his life when such an audacious question would have resulted in him snapping at the frightened girl but now he simply replied, "I'm fifteen years old. Maybe you should ask the Ministry why they let him return. Or perhaps you should ask yourself why known murderers and rapists weren't sentenced to a Dementor's kiss when my innocent godfather wasn't even given a trial and it had been ordered that he be kissed on sight if found a couple of years ago?"

The girl closed her mouth with an audible click. She was about to fire off a retort when Harry's words finally sunk in. She wandered back to the Hufflepuff table with a thoughtful expression on her face, and several others who had overheard the exchange had similar looks on their faces.

Harry barely suppressed a smirk as he glanced up at the staff table to see Umbridge not in her usual seat watching the proceedings with her typical simpering smile. Instead of lightening his mood, Harry frowned in consternation for a moment. If this meant what he thought it did Umbridge had moved her plans forward by a few days.

Hermione had apparently noticed this also and whispered into his ear, "Do you think she moved the schedule up?"

Harry sighed and whispered into her ear, "Well, Voldemort announcing his return probably made things a bit stickier for Fudge. I imagine he needs to strike before he can't anymore. The cornered and wounded animal being the most dangerous, right?"

Hermione smiled grimly as they finally took their usual seats at the Gryffindor table. Ron and Lavender were sitting on the far end of the table acting just barely within the bounds of acceptable behavior. Unfortunately, Lavender spoon feeding Ron had already put several of the surrounding students off of their usual appetites with the display.

Neville and Ginny, well something had happened between them over the weekend. They were still sitting together, but where before it might have been construed as a boyfriend and girlfriend doing so, the extra gap between them signified warm friendship and nothing more. Hermione noted this difference with an arched eyebrow and made a mental note to discuss it with Ginny later; for now she had to see if her suspicions with Umbridge were confirmed.

Meanwhile Harry glanced over at Malfoy, not terribly surprised to see the blonde-haired pointy-faced Slytherin smirking before he toasted his goblet to the Gryffindor table. Sighing he glanced over at Hermione, noting idly she was watching Neville and Ginny somewhat

intently. While he was somewhat interested in what had his girlfriend staring so intently at the two he was more disposed to worry about what Umbridge had in store for the morning.

As though his thoughts were a trigger the doors to the Great Hall flew open with a flourish, slamming against the walls. A large group strode into the hall, Umbridge leading the way brandishing a roll of parchment like a weapon as her beady eyes glinted triumphantly.

Dumbledore looked on serenely; he had apparently been expecting such a scene and merely observed as Umbridge and twenty Aurors spread out to cover as much of the hall as possible.

Umbridge unfurled the parchment and spoke with a flourish, "Albus Dumbledore, in a majority vote conducted by a special Ministry taskforce for education, you have been removed as headmaster from Hogwarts. I have been appointed as Headmaster Pro Tem."

Smiling sweetly at Dumbledore's placid expression she continued, "The board of governors will have 30 days to appeal this decision, which will become permanent at that time. Ministry Aurors will escort you to your office where you will be allowed to pack all of your personal belongings. If you choose to disregard this vote you will be forcibly removed from the premises at wandpoint to guarantee the safety of the students of the school. Do you have any questions?"

Dumbledore merely made a statement eerily similar to the one he made back in second year in Hagrid's hut. "I am not the one who will have people to answer to when your fight for power goes awry. I will always be in Hogwarts as long as those loyal to me remain."

Without any sign of struggle Dumbledore stood and gracefully exited the hall. Even the Aurors who were sympathetic to Umbridge regarded the old wizard with reverence, giving him a wide berth as he left.

Umbridge chanced a momentary smile of triumphant glee before she strutted up to the golden throne Dumbledore normally inhabited. Settling into her position pompously she spoke, "As you were, students."

While no one verbalized it, Harry shivered and simply felt the school become a darker and less happy place. Hermione took his hand and couldn't suppress a tiny shiver of her own. They were all alone now and the time to stand up was approaching quickly.

A/N: There it is, another chapter, delayed by work and a lack of quality time in front of the computer screen. I've already outlined a majority of the next chapter and I hope to have it out in the next ten days or so.

Next chapter...Harry and Hermione are going to come to some sort of an understanding for the rest of the year and beyond...while Hermione and Ron...well they won't. The first kinks in the grand plan of Umbridge will be unveiled...and we will check in with Voldemort...and my version of Bella...no baby talk for her this time around.

Thanks to everyone that has read, and thanks for the reviews.

Question of the Chapter:

A common theory amongst Potter fans is that the last two books have signified a different kind of death.

Black Death: Sirius in OOTP

White Death: Dumbledore in HBP

Red Death: DH...who will it be?

Any theories as to who the red death is...a Weasley perhaps...or Hagrid...whose first name actually means Red...I'll be happy to offer my input to anyone who gives me theirs.

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Hermione couldn't help but smile at the sight before her. While it was true the castle had been under a constant tension since Dumbledore had been removed, it was situations like this that made everything else disappear. The Gryffindor common room was buzzing with activity on this Tuesday night, and Hermione was feeling slightly giddy from a combination of how well the majority of her classes were going and how strong her relationship with Harry had proven to be after their little fight from a few days prior. Of course, it also didn't hurt that her 16th birthday was going to be in two days and she was scarcely containing her excitement at the prospect of what Harry might have planned for her. After all, Harry was her first boyfriend and she had never before had the opportunity to enjoy the single minded attention that he constantly paid her.

Perhaps the one spot on her otherwise sunny life was the slowly developing issues between her and Lavender. The blonde haired buxom Gryffindor roommate that she had never really connected with was slowly starting to drive her crazy with all of the constant affection she required of Ron to keep her happy. She could see it made Ron uncomfortable in some ways, but then again she could also tell he enjoyed the attention. For that reason alone all of the little things that irked her to this point, well she had refrained from opening her mouth and commenting on them. If it made Ron happy she wasn't going to interfere, she owed that much to him at the very least.

The twins were in the opposite corner of the common room and they had a group of first years captivated as they showed off some of their joke products. Hermione had entered the common room earlier after a long library session of OWL review with Harry and noticed the pair preparing something in a small container as they flicked their wands in a bizarre medley of motion. She had simply sent the pair a warning look. She didn't have a problem with harmless pranks in principle, but rather it was usually the case that someone ended up hurt that often didn't deserve it.

While things had settled down somewhat following dinner in the Great Hall, Hermione was aware that several couples were missing from the common room – most likely on expeditions to find their

companions tongs with their tongues. Hermione snorted at that particular image. While in all honesty it was reasonably accurate, it seemed much sillier when placed in that context. Her own relationship with Harry had progressed beyond the initial snogging stage, but that didn't mean she was averse to a nice steamy snogging session once in awhile to get her blood pumping even now. While most thought she was a bit of a prude, if any of those people asked Harry would gladly tell them that she was adventurous, just not an exhibitionist.

Rolling her eyes at her own silly musings, she didn't notice at first as Ron and Lavender stumbled in through the portrait hole attached at the lips. Ron swept a few first and second years from the common room couch with a threatening sounding grunt, just as Lavender took his bottom lip between her teeth and bit down lightly.

Harry had been focused on reading an article in the newest edition of Which Broomstick?, when he was poked in the ribs by his girlfriend in a manner too hard to be considered playful.

Hermione hissed, "Look at them Harry, we have to say something."

Harry's eyes aligned with the couch and he groaned; after four years he could tell when a big row between Hermione and Ron was coming. It was little things like Hermione's narrowed eyes, but the net result was that Ron was about to be blindsided by an attack from said bushy haired witch. Before he could even stand up Hermione had shot out of her chair and darted towards the couch to the offending couple.

"Ronald Weasley, I would expect this sort of behavior from Lavender but you know better!" Hermione shrieked in outrage.

Harry dutifully stood next to his girlfriend as he watched the infamous Weasley temper began to boil over starting with the telltale reddening ears. Lavender squeaked as Ron removed her from his lap and dumped her onto the adjoining couch cushion before he looked Hermione dead in the eyes and in a deathly serious voice asked, "What?"

Hermione did thrive on arguing on Ron to an extent, and she retorted, "I would think your snogging isn't nearly important enough to allow such frivolous disregard for the rules." Her eyes took on a calculating gleam as she added, "But, then again maybe you really do want to sit on the bench for the first Quidditch match."

To Ron, having his Quidditch livelihood threatened was perhaps the worst possible thing one could do; hence his reaction when Hermione had turned in Harry's Firebolt a couple of years earlier. "You wouldn't bloody dare do that." Ron's face twisted into a sickly smile, "What's the problem, Harry won't snog someone as plain as you? Or is it that you are jealous of the fact that there is more to me than books and parchment?"

A faint scent of ozone permeated the air as Hermione brandished her wand to levy out some payment for Ron's words. However, a gentle caress on her arm eased the anger she was feeling enough for her to grind out, "That will get you a detention Weasley, and you had better be thankful that Harry stepped in when he did, or I would have you under so many jinxes that you would never see the light of day without one of them on you again."

Ron had no retort for this but decided he needed to say something until the warning look in Harry's eyes caused him to pause. It wasn't a vengeful look, but it was a look that clearly said Don't mess with Hermione right now.

As Harry quickly followed a mane of bushy hair out of the portrait hole Ron felt a strange sense of satisfaction settle into his being. Not at arguing with Hermione and holding his own for once, but instead the satisfaction of finally making his own path in life, a path not directed by Hermione or his mother.

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Just Over Two Years Earlier

He was standing quietly watching her again, her hair a disheveled mess and face lined with stress as she frantically scrolled through a series of legal texts.

He wanted to apologize for how he had reacted about the Firebolt, but he also knew he needed to hear her apologize also. Not for the simple act of her caring enough to have the broom checked, but for the simple act of assuming he wouldn't agree to it. It was a matter of tact, and sometimes Hermione forgot that skill when she was faced with a tough decision. His own apology was sitting on the edge of his tongue, but his 13-year-old mind wasn't prepared to deliver it just yet.

Memories of nine Christmases growing up with the Dursleys without gifts sprung to his mind, and he couldn't help but feel a smidgen of resentment against Hermione again. Why did she seem to think he was undeserving of being given something nice? She hadn't exactly objected back in first year when he got the Nimbus. She wouldn't understand how it felt to be taunted about not being worthy of receiving gifts, so what gave her that right to take a gift away from him?

Just as quickly as his resentment flared up he sighed and leaned his head against the bookcase he was hiding behind. Hermione sniffed again looking even more distressed than before as she buried her head in her hands and began to shake silently. Harry winced and pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his robes. A whispered levitation charm later he floated the piece of cloth next to her hand.

He still wasn't completely prepared to forgive her, but at least he could show he still cared about how she felt as he turned on heel and quietly exited the library. He would never see the small smile that crept across her face as she dabbed at her eyes with the small monogrammed handkerchief with the Initials HJP on it. He had just given her something much better than words, and she would never forget it.

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Of course, it had been two very long years since that particular argument and much had changed for one Harry Potter. Things like Quidditch and broomsticks were important still, but they were dwarfed by many other things, one of which he was following out of the common room.

It didn't take long to track Hermione down as she was in the first unlocked classroom, sitting on the professor's desk. She had apparently conjured a flock of bright yellow canaries and she idly flicked her wand as she watched them circle above her head.

Harry softly sat next to her on the desktop before he commented, "You do realize that conjuration of living creatures is a post-NEWT level spell, don't you?"

Hermione smiled slightly at the implied compliment before she shrugged. "Do you think he will ever grow up?"

Harry snorted and wryly replied, "Well, I guess that entirely depends on your definition."

Hermione rolled her eyes and playfully punched Harry's arm before she leaned her head on his shoulder and sighed and softly murmured, "I'm glad you came for me."

Harry reached around and hugged her small body to his tightly. "I'll always come for you." His ears and face went bright red when he realized the double entendre. "Erm that is to say I'll always be here for you."

Hermione giggled at his discomfort and spun around in his arms to give him a kiss on the tip of his nose before she leaned in by his ear and teased, "I would certainly hope you meant the first part also; at least when we get to that point."

Harry grinned at the thought before he gently brushed Hermione's hair away from her face and kissed her softly on the lips. "As much as I enjoy talking with Hermione the shameless flirt, I have to say in all seriousness that if we can always talk about what is bothering us like this we won't have any problems."

Hermione nodded as she tucked her head against Harry's chest and listened to his heartbeat thump strongly. While it was true that Ron had the ability to infuriate her faster than anyone else she knew, Harry had the ability to defuse her temper just as quickly. She rolled

her eyes as she thought about all of the younger Gryffindor girls who thought that her and Ron's arguing was some form of flirting. She would have to talk to them about the importance of calmly discussing your differences with a potential crush. Her parents had taught her at a young age that the best way to keep a healthy marriage and relationship was to communicate honestly and readily.

As she thought harder on that specific memory she remembered something that she needed to discuss with Harry. Of course it was completely unrelated, but she always had many different trains of thought going at once and she didn't see any problem with that.

Harry eyed her quizzically as she pulled away; he already missed the warmth she had been sharing. Smiling beatifically Hermione asked, "Harry, you know how Umbridge is completely worthless as a professor?"

Harry nodded and she continued, "Well, considering the spotty track record we've had with Defense instructors the past five years I can't say she is that bad. I mean at least we aren't taking quizzes on her favorite color."

Harry opened his mouth to object and Hermione shook her head. "Remus and Professor Moody were both very good, but they didn't help the weaker students all that much. Remus taught dark creatures brilliantly, but there is so much more to defense than that topic. Moody taught his best students everything we needed for our OWL and NEWT examinations, but people like Ron were left behind a bit."

Harry frowned. "I can tell that you are going somewhere with this that I'm not going to like one bit."

Hermione placed her hand directly over his heart as she continued softly, "Harry, you were personally tutored by Moody for a good portion of the school year. You know more about defense than anyone else in the school right now with Professor Dumbledore being gone. If you don't teach people defense then how can they defend themselves against Voldemort and the Death Eaters?"

Harry groaned and tried to pull away from Hermione but she grasped at his arm tightly to prevent an escape. Finally he asked, "Do you mind?"

Hermione decided it was time to break out the heavy guns as she batted her eyes and in a persuasive voice said, "Please just listen for a moment Harry."

Harry eyed her warily but stopped trying to get away as she collected her thoughts. Finally she said, "If I promise to keep the group to a reasonable number will you teach us as much as you can of the advanced material that Moody taught you?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair and noticed Hermione's gaze flicker over his lips. He mostly managed to suppress a smirk as he weighed the options of having a grateful girlfriend compared to an angry one. After a moment he realized it really wasn't much of a decision and wearily said, "Ok, I'll do it."

Harry removed his glasses and added, "I know it drives you crazy but I don't think you and Ron can keep having these petty arguments any more. Not right now, not with Umbridge and Voldemort to deal with. I need both of you talking and working together, especially if I am going to do this defense tutoring."

Hermione seemed to catch the weary tone of his voice and her eyes lit up as she coyly asked, "What am I to do with you Harry? You always give me these reasons to just snog your brains out, and I just don't know what to do."

Harry eyed her seriously for a moment and said, "Well, the snogging sounds brilliant, beyond brilliant in fact. But, can you just lay off Ron for awhile? I am going to have a little chat with him and hopefully settle things to right."

Hermione wanted to bluster at Harry's veiled insinuation that she'd further inflame their mutual best friend, but she found that she couldn't, and that resulted in her somewhat subdued, "Ok, I promise to let Ron be until you've had your chat with him."

Harry pulled her into a hug and rubbed her back gently as he tried to pull her out of her sudden mood shift. "I need both of you if we are going to pull off this term in one piece. I know Ron can get you wound up faster than anyone else can, and frankly I think he takes a certain amount of perverse pleasure from it. I mean you really didn't see him after the Firebolt thing; he acted as if he had pulled one over on you. It wasn't until he saw the toll classes were taking on you that he softened even a little bit."

Hermione leaned her head against Harry's chest inhaling his scent deeply as she murmured, "You're rambling Harry. It's sweet, but I understand what you're saying. I trust you, and I know you trust me. That's enough for me at the moment."

She pulled away, eyes slightly red from a couple of escaped tears and Harry thought she looked so vulnerable and lovely at that moment he cleared his throat and in his best 'Percy the Prefect' impersonation intoned, "Ms. Granger, I believe you mentioned something about snogging me senseless earlier. Am I to understand a prefect is condoning such behavior?"

Hermione cottoned on to the little game Harry was playing and she coyly replied, "Oh, I'm afraid I must have missed that section of the handbook. Could you give me a refresher course?"

Harry feigned deep thought, "Well, you could start by taking off your robes if my memory serves me. I think I read somewhere that snuggling helps; at least that always helps me think more clearly."

Hermione nodded and impishly pulled her robe over her head before winking playfully at Harry's silly grin. She was wearing a tight white t-shirt, and Harry happily noted she wasn't wearing a bra of any sort. While Hermione wasn't exactly chesty, she cut a fine figure in Harry's estimation and he made a point to caress a particular area practically begging to be appreciated fully.

As Harry gently and lovingly rubbed her chest Hermione tugged on his robes to pull off as well, her hands insistent on completing their task. With a final tug Harry's robes were tossed asunder just before he pulled her into a deep kiss. His tongue plunged into Hermione's

mouth as they engaged in a kiss that made Ron and Lavender's earlier snogfest seem tame by comparison.

It would be a while until Hermione could show her appreciation as well, but by the sounds she was making she didn't mind the wait in the least.

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It was the next day before Harry could get a moment to speak with Ron, and he wanted to keep the chat light and away from dangerous territory – the sort of territory where Ron would force him to choose between himself and Hermione. He was keenly aware of the low likelihood of mending that breach with the youngest Weasley male if it ever happened.

Ron had been walking alone for once. Lavender had gone off with Parvati about their Divination assignment leaving him wandering the halls, for want of something better to do. His argument with Hermione had already spread throughout the school, and Lavender had been very smug that her boyfriend had stood up for her in the face of his best female friend.

Harry's voice was friendly but had a certain edge to it as he spoke out from the shadows. "Ron, we need to talk mate."

Ron quickly spun to view his friend in the shadows. His green eyes almost seemed to be glowing ominously and the ginger haired wizard had to clamp down on his emotions to avoid flinching as he said, "Hey Harry, what the bloody hell are you doing in the shadows?"

Without missing a beat Harry replied, "Waiting for you Ron."

Ron decided not to play dumb and he merely nodded. He knew Harry would talk to him about publicly berating Hermione, he just hadn't thought it would be so soon after the fact. Following his friend into a deserted classroom he didn't even blink as Harry wandlessly closed the door and with a casual flick of his wand privacy charms went into effect.

"Now this is the part where I am supposed to yell at you for ripping into my girlfriend." Harry said in a light tone.

Ron gaped. Of all of the things he had expected Harry to say, that certainly hadn't been one of them. Finally he managed a sputtered, "What?"

Harry chuckled as he placed his hands into his pockets and wryly said, "What am I supposed to say? You yelled at Hermione, prepare to die."

The muggle movie reference was lost on Ron as Harry sighed and explained, "Listen mate, Hermione has this thing about people she cares for. She doesn't do anything in halves and when she protects you, she does it all of the time. Heck, she even protects you from yourself if she thinks you need it. While she hasn't come out and said it to me, I think she has some suspicions about Lavender's intentions towards you."

Ron closed his mouth with an audible click and was about to fire off a nasty retort when he realized Harry had said nothing disrespectful, merely voiced Hermione's suspicions. Frowning he retorted, "I thought part of your 'perfect' boyfriend image was always agreeing with Hermione."

Harry grinned genuinely, "Mate, no one agrees all of the time. The key is not allowing a disagreement to come between you. Hermione cares enough about you to call you out on what you and Lavender were doing out in the common room in front of first years, while I care enough to let you make a mistake if indeed that is what this is."

Ron had to admit that Harry was approaching the topic with much more tact than Hermione had the previous night and he grunted, "Would have preferred if Hermione had done the same last night."

Harry shook his head and laughed at this. "Mate, no matter when and how Hermione would have said this, you two would have had a row about it. Now maybe the break in your snog might have made it worse, but there's no changing that now."

Ron frowned but nodded and scary Harry suddenly made an appearance as he added in a low tone, "Purposely embarrass and hurt Hermione in public again, and you'll be getting your teeth pulled from your arse for quite awhile, and trust me I can make it so magic won't be the means of removal."

Ron blinked at the drastic change in his friend's voice as he asked, "What?"

Smiling Harry had returned as he said, "I have to wear two hats when you two row. Fortunately, I have a few years of practice doing just that. The fact of the matter is that I can't deal with this pettiness while I try to juggle Voldemort and Umbridge." His face became implacable as he added, "Ron, don't force me to make a choice between you two. You are my best mate and my first friend, but I need Hermione to breathe. You wouldn't like how it ends."

With that Ron heard the door to the room open with a squelch. He turned to see who had entered the room, but seeing no one he turned again only to find that Harry had disappeared while his back had been turned. Sitting down heavily into the nearest chair, Ron stared blankly at the blackboard, silently willing it to show the answers to this new turn in his personal life.

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Severus Snape sat in his personal quarters sipping a glass of brandy to take his mind off of the pain the Dark Mark on his arm was causing, both literally and figuratively. Pain relieving potions caused dependency and did lose their efficacy after awhile, so he had resorted to pain management and the occasional glass of brandy to take the edge off. His muggle father had been an alcoholic, so he had no desire to follow down that particular road either.

For whatever reason the children of Death Eaters had yet to show any difference in how they interacted with him, and for the life of him he couldn't figure out why. In fact, the only Slytherin who still treated him how he expected to be treated was his godson Draco Malfoy, and he wasn't sure how to deal with that. His godson had approached him a couple of days earlier with some concerns regarding Umbridge,

and they weren't of the typical Slytherin variety. As another jolt of pain coursed through his body he reached out and drained the rest of the brandy from the glass. Draco's position was becoming increasingly tenuous, and Severus clearly remembered that students that had completed their OWL examinations were eligible for the dark mark. Lucius had been grooming his son for a Death Eater mask since he had been born, and now perhaps for the first time he could see Draco fighting to break free from that mold.

He had even managed to gleam a memory from Draco's mind about Umbridge recruiting his Slytherins to start an inquisitorial squad. With Albus out of the castle his most powerful potential allies would have to be Potter and Granger. Not necessarily due to their magical prowess, but their ability to gather support to combat Umbridge's machinations within the castle was unmatched.

Rubbing his left forearm absently he reached across his small study desk and grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill. This would take every ounce of his Slytherin cunning to pull off and still keep his position within the castle beyond question. A serious plan would have to be designed and followed to ensure its success; suddenly Snape wished he hadn't just finished off his second glass of brandy a moment earlier.

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It had taken Harry the entire day to get a moment of peace on Thursday, a fact that made him rather agitated seeing as how it was Hermione's sixteenth birthday and they hadn't even had the chance to have a nice birthday snog as of yet. It seemed as if Murphy's law was in full effect, because they day had started with the best of intentions as Harry had conjured a red rose for Hermione, only to have the rose forgotten as Hermione dashed right by him to deal with an apparent disturbance between some Gryffindor second year girls out in the hall.

Classes hadn't been any better as every attempt to give Hermione the rose and a proper Happy Birthday had been thwarted, although she had finally cottoned on to his efforts during a small break in the insanity during lunch and her small smile of gratitude for his rose had

kept him going. Finally, after the last class of the day had been finished, Harry pulled Hermione into one of the secluded alcoves Hogwarts had an abundance of and proceeded to give her the most passionate snog of their short lives.

Pulling away breathing heavily Harry murmured into Hermione's ear, "Happy sixteenth birthday."

Hermione shivered involuntarily before she leaned back in Harry's embrace far enough to fully see his face as she smiled slyly, "I hope that isn't all you got me."

Harry's eyes seemed to twinkle as he replied, "Oh I think I might have a few more birthday snogs somewhere in me."

Hermione giggled, still such a foreign and wonderful sound as the giggle turned into a scandalized laugh, "That's not what I meant you prat."

Harry wagged his eyebrows promising those birthday snogs but with a wave of his hand he summoned a wrapped box from his pocket and removed the shrinking charm on it. It was an odd looking circular box, but it was wrapped in magical paper that had copies of Hogwarts a History opening and closing in a coordinated pattern. Untying the ribbon holding the large lid on the box, Hermione quizzically gazed down at the panorama of colors from the small crystal rose on a pendant sitting at the bottom of the box.

Harry softly explained, "Sirius told me about it. I think it's rather pretty, but he also told me it has a lot of significance in the Wizarding world too."

Hermione furrowed her brow in thought before she sighed in annoyance that she didn't know what the flower signified. Harry took her disquiet as a cue to continue. "It's nothing to do with betrothals or anything like that. The flower is something like a warrior queen's pendant. You see my several times great aunt was sort of like Joan of Arc for the Wizarding world. Apparently she used this pendant to great success in evading the opposing army and their anti-apparition

wards. I just wanted you to have this, for a fall back plan if you do get trapped in a sticky situation."

Hermione's expression softened as she asked, "How does it work?"

Harry rubbed his neck in a nervous gesture, "Um, I don't understand it specifically, but Remus seemed to think it would work in a pinch. Something about being out of phase of anti-apparition wards, and erm being an old variant of a spell that's been nearly forgotten."

Hermione nodded as she reached into the box and removed the sparkling pendant gently taking care to take in all of the minute features of the priceless heirloom. While she didn't know exactly what spells would allow someone to avoid anti-apparition wards she couldn't help but blurt out, "If this is an heirloom then why didn't your mother have it?"

Harry flinched momentarily before he hoarsely replied, "She wouldn't leave without me or my dad. The one limitation of the pendant is that it only works for one person. I imagine it's part of the reason why my great aunt never married."

Hermione wanted to curse herself for saying such a callous thing at a time that should have been happy; for whatever reason she had been saying the wrong things a lot lately. Thankfully Harry knew that she never meant things in a malicious way.

She was getting a little tired of the role reversal that seemed to be happening. For four years she had been the level headed one in their little group, but at some point in the past few months Harry had taken over that role. She wanted to rage against the injustice of being a teenage girl and the huge mood swings she seemed to be experiencing, but there were some things, she was aware, that everyone had to deal with. She pledged she would start dealing with them better, if not for herself then for Harry.

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While things with Hermione were mended to his satisfaction, the thing with Ron was driving him to distraction. While it was true they didn't

share the closeness they had their first three years at Hogwarts, which was to be expected, he felt a different chasm growing between them and he was at a loss as to what he could do.

It was with this in mind that he fell into a restless slumber, having forgotten to completely refortify his Occlumency shields.

Harry awoke in a dark dungeon and he immediately knew what had happened; he had somehow connected to Voldemort's mind through their scar as he had back before his fourth year. Voldemort was sitting in a high backed twisted looking black throne, a sort of juxtaposition to Dumbledore's golden throne at Hogwarts. Harry gazed out of the snake like eyes of his mortal enemy and saw a few familiar faces and a few faces he had never seen before.

"Barty, Bella how go the preparations for my next move against Potter and Dumbledore?" Voldemort/Harry hissed with just a hint of malice.

Barty Crouch Jr. had wild eyes - apparently a second stint in Azkaban had done nothing for his mental state - as he replied, "The preparations continue as you have requested my lord."

The woman Harry assumed to be Bella looked very well kept and while her eyes weren't wild, they did have a certain unsettling glint that he wished he couldn't see, or at the very least could suppress to keep it out of his future nightmares.

Bella smiled seductively as she trailed her finger down from her lips to her throat and finally to the edge of a plunging neckline. "The targets you have given us will die slowly and painfully as you requested my lord."

Voldemort/Harry felt a flash of triumph settle into his mind before he replied, "Excellent, we will destroy the great light wizards, one piece at a time. That which they seek to protect will always be their greatest weaknesses, and we shall exploit them."

Harry suddenly felt a great force expel him from Voldemort's mind before he awoke tangled in his sheets, his body covered in a sheen of cold sweat. His throat was raw, as though he had been screaming for some time, and he was thankful that his silencing charms had held during the dream.

When he mustered the energy to sit up then he would have a letter to write to a certain exiled headmaster. Until then he shivered as he replayed the contents of the vision over and over again in his mind's eye.

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A/N: Many apologies for the long delay in posting but things should speed up for the remainder of the summer. Next chapter...well let's just say you won't have to wait long to see what Voldemort has planned.

I have DH in my possession and have begun a slow read through it. I will skim over any Ron dialogue in the book and I refuse to read the epilogue I have heard so much about...

JKR created this huge set of expectations as to how she could finish the book...and frankly I think she succumbed to the pressure at least in terms of resolving the story...but alas we shall persevere as we have been since HBP and the IOD.

Thanks for the reviews and thanks for reading.

Thanks for the newly beta'ed version of the chapter goes to chem prof. As a special treat he has given his harmonian review of DH....skip if you don't want to be mildly spoiled.

The bulk of DH is at its essence a story of the love between Harry and Hermione, and the things that love leads them to do for each other (particularly her for him). It's only JKR's stubborn insistence that it is a platonic love that keeps it from turning into a magnificent romance. The Ron-Hermione bits are simply forced into the story in a few places. The interaction between Harry and Ginny is nearly non-existent, shockingly so during the aftermath of the battle when Harry

prefers Ron and Hermione's company to hers. It would be child's play to turn that book into a H/Hr ship – deleting a few sentences here and there, and rewriting a paragraph or two. The epilogue would only require the exchanging of a few names.

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Steve McGill had a very boring life, well, boring for a wizard anyways. He acted as a security guard for the Ministry of Magic having washed out in the training portion of Auror Academy nearly 12 years ago. His partner at the security check point was Eric Monty, a man of a similar background who fortunately shared many of the same interests.

Boring as well was their routine every day that they worked together. One would show up early and set up the work station while the other snuck into muggle London and bought coffee and some sweet rolls, also picking up a copy of the Daily Prophet to give them something to complain about.

Today it was Steve's turn to show up early and process the first few workers showing up at the checkpoint for wand check and security clearance. But there was a strange buzz from the first few witches and wizards that had Steve on alert for some strange reason.

Eric shuffled in through the side door with his arms full of food and the morning's edition of the Prophet dangling in the crook of his elbow.

"Oy, what took you so long?" Steve grumbled as he reached out for his roll and cup of coffee.

Eric took a large bite of his apple fritter before he mumbled through his open mouth, "vef rong mine af de halperfand."

Steve merely arched an eyebrow and Eric swallowed. "There was a long line at the paper stand."

Steve held an impatient hand out as Eric slowly handed over the still unopened and creased morning edition of the Prophet.

Steve opened the paper and immediately his eyes went as wide as saucers. Eric frowned before he asked, "What's it all about then?"

Steve blinked before he turned the paper in trembling hands and revealed the massive headline which covered half of the page, followed a magical photo of the Dark Mark over Azkaban prison.

The headline simply read:

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's Official Return to Terror

Eric dropped his cup of coffee on the ground from suddenly limp fingers as he began to mumble incoherently. They were both broken out of their numbing and nearly paralyzing fear as Amelia Bones cleared her throat and said, "While I appreciate the gravity of the moment gentlemen, perhaps we could get back to work now?"

Steve quickly turned and did the obligatory wand check and identification checking spell to screen any potentially polyjuiced individuals; a protocol that had gone into effect a few weeks earlier.

Amelia smiled and with a wry grin added, "Why don't you start using the Imperius detecting charms you were indoctrinated in also gentlemen?"

Eric took the opportunity to do as requested and as the results turned up negative they gave the DMLE head her wand back and allowed her to pass through into the depths of the Ministry of Magic. It was going to be a strange new reality now that Voldemort's return had been confirmed, but at least they could manage. Amelia Bones after all wouldn't allow any less.

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Several hundred feet away Cornelius Fudge was wringing his bowler hat in his hands as he watched all of his carefully laid plans go up in smoke with the release of that one stupid little picture. He had traded in a lot of favors to keep that picture out of the Prophet for as long as it had.

He had managed to at least put Delores into a position of power before his house of cards had begun to fall. If he played the role of surprised Minister he could maybe last a couple of more weeks before a call for his head could be made.

Sighing, he rubbed at his eyes tiredly; he should have listened to Dumbledore and Potter all of those months ago after the third task of the tri-wizard tournament. But he hadn't and it would ultimately define his term as Minister of Magic. Now he needed to find a way to remain close to power and hope that he could ride a wave of public support back to the office of Minister. It wasn't a lot to grasp onto, but for Cornelius Fudge it was better than nothing. Now it was time to spin things into his advantage.

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Amelia sighed as she cleared the security check point behind the nearly hysterical security guards. She imagined that if Voldemort ever did come through the front door to visit the Ministry he would meet little to no resistance. While in all reality it should be a good day, seeing the end of Fudge's power hungry reign as Minister, she knew she had to get to work to set everything into motion that needed to be for a change in the power structure.

Her first stop of the day was at the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts offices to talk to Arthur Weasley, because with Voldemort on the loose she needed someone who knew a little about the effect it would have on the muggle world.

Entering the cramped corridor that led to the office she was seeking she had to laugh at the sheer absurdity of the politics within the Ministry. Magic could easily make every department of the Ministry of equal size, but some Minister in the past had started a movement that had created a hierarchy within the departments.

As she opened the door to what seemed to be a broom closet with one small desk near the back, a smaller witch at the desk pleasantly greeted Amelia, "Hello and welcome to the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office. What can I help you with today?"

Amelia blinked and removed her monocle before she replied, "I was wondering if I could have a moment of Mr. Weasley's time today?"

The small witch nodded and hit a small button on her desk and a moment later Arthur walked out of a small office a few feet away, his face slightly tired but smiling just the same.

"Hello Amelia, fancy seeing you in this out of the way spot today. What can I help you with?" Arthur asked as he ran a hand through his thinning red hair before he gestured to an empty seat.

Amelia nodded gratefully and sat down in the offered seat before she cut right to the chase. "I was wondering if I could task you with something, something which would be specifically tailored towards your interests."

Arthur's surprise couldn't be masked as Amelia chuckled at his plain shock before he replied, "Erm, what exactly does that mean?"

Amelia smirked and replied, "You specialize in muggles Arthur, and I need you to find by any means available what sort of losses the muggles will sustain based upon the last war with V-Voldemort. If there are some particularly bright muggleborn wizards or witches at your disposal, please get some input from them."

Arthur nodded dazedly before he asked, "But surely such an expense won't be approved by the Minister's office?"

Amelia shook her head. "Don't worry yourself about that Arthur. I've already secured funding for this and Barty Crouch has signed off on it. As the head of the Muggle Liaison's department and seeing how he has the authority to do this, there shouldn't be any problems."

Arthur smiled sheepishly. "Of course you'd have thought of everything, I didn't mean to imply otherwise."

Amelia smiled cordially. "Indeed Arthur, and there was no offense taken. For the record however, make certain you get a copy of this morning's edition of the Daily Prophet, it may alleviate your concerns."

Amelia excused herself a moment later, finding Arthur's perplexed look particularly satisfying. She had always loved having that effect on people.

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Back at Hogwarts it was like the sun rising after months of living in the dark, as students read the morning edition of the Prophet and began to read between the lines about the implications of the announcement.

Harry and Hermione couldn't help but feel somewhat vindicated from the palpable state of fear shared by students and Ministry employees surrounding the Great Hall. While the Prophet was by no means a perfect example of journalistic integrity, it was near impossible to doctor magical photographs and this one really left nothing to the imagination. Only Voldemort possessed the daring and power to attack Azkaban, and it meant one thing - the whispered rumors of the dark lord's resurrection were the truth and the Ministry had covered it up.

Of course only one person had the ability to keep the entire Ministry mum about something like this, the Minister of Magic. At the Gryffindor table Harry and Hermione were doing their best to keep any kind of 'I told you so' looks from spreading across their faces.

Umbridge was glowering up at the staff table, but while this was a severe blow to her plans she had built contingencies into them for just such an event. In fact, the only real pressing problem was her inability to access the headmaster's office to alter the wards to her satisfaction. It was as though the castle failed to recognize her as Headmistress, and that was preposterous in its own right.

As she glanced around the Great Hall she slowly made eye contact with a few of the selected students that were informally inducted into her inquisitorial squad. She finished by locking gazes with the mudblood Granger and Potter; they had the potential to be a dangerous pair of enemies if she continued on the path she was.

Shaking her head she amended her previous thoughts. Potter and Granger couldn't be a threat to her. After all she had accomplished too much now to have a pair of fifth year students ruin it all for her.

A flurry of owls were already rolling into the Great Hall, letters from frantic parents to their children to ensure their safety no doubt. Unnoticed in all of the madness a nondescript brown owl swooped into the Great Hall and dropped a letter into the lap of the appointed headmistress. Her stubby fingers greedily ripped the ribbon tying the letter shut and with a flourish she quickly pulled out and read the letter.

As a momentary look of triumph flashed across her face the stern eyes of Professor McGonagall narrowed slightly. She had a letter of her own to write, and she had a bad feeling about what Umbridge's letter might lead to.

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Dumbledore had replied to Harry's letter about his vision by Sunday night with the short and concise reply stating that steps were being taken to safeguard against Riddle's murderous plans.

While the answer hadn't soothed Harry's anxiety, he was at least happy that Dumbledore was seriously taking his words to heart or at least gave the appearance of such.

Being at Hogwarts basically meant that for the first time since he was 11, Harry Potter would not be on the front lines of the war with Voldemort. It was with a start that Harry realized that for some reason unbeknownst to him it was slowly driving him stir crazy.

He wanted to contribute and fight from the front lines of the war, after all the prophecy stated it was either him or Voldemort. That wasn't to say he wanted to recklessly throw himself into the line of fire, but he did want to contribute somehow, and that wasn't something he was able to do presently at Hogwarts.

In fact, if he was completely honest he knew school was a luxury he didn't think he could afford to have. Quidditch matches and worrying

about his OWL's seemed a mockery in comparison to what people like Sirius and Remus were doing at the moment.

His scar ached in spite of his Occlumency shields being at full power all of the time, and he knew something very bad was about to happen.

As he waited for Hermione to return from a meeting that all of the female prefects had with the first year girls, he reached into his bag intent on finding a useful spell he could and would use in the war when he was finally allowed to fight. Now he only hoped his feeling of dread would abate by the time Hermione returned from her meeting.

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It was nearing dusk and Aberforth Dumbledore was beginning to feel rather perplexed as he gazed around his completely empty bar. While not nearly as talented in magic as his older brother, Aberforth could cast a right nasty ward to prevent any of the wrong crowd from entering his bar.

With a flick of his grimy wand he was startled to see his wards had been brought down, and before he could even make a move to signal a Floo call for some Order assistance the front door of his bar was blown open as seven masked Death Eaters stalked into the bar with murder on their minds. It was to be the first attack of the night, but it surely would not be the last.

The last thought Aberforth had before he died was, I hope Albus is alright.

.....

In Kensington Michael and Bianca Granger were enjoying a late dinner as they sat and watched the telly in their living room. Winky was also present, but she was invisible to the eyes of even the charges Hermione had placed her in protection of.

Haltingly Winky felt the apparition of a nearby wizard with her engrained house elf magical instincts. She wasn't aware if it was a friendly or dangerous wizard, so she prepared exactly as Hermione

had instructed her to. As she popped away to pack of her Granger's stuff Barty Crouch Jr., a figure Winky had some personal history with, apparated into a muggle living room for the first time in many years.

Bianca screamed as the sandy haired man with crazy eyes briefly took in his surroundings before he sneered, "Ah the mudblood's parents I presume."

Michael was the first to break from his stupor; he hadn't seen actual magic performed since Hermione's professor McGonagall had first come with his little girl's acceptance letter to Hogwarts. He finally managed to speak in a reasonably strong voice, "Now see here..."

His words were cut off as Crouch wordlessly cast his favorite spell. In fact, it was the same spell he had used in conjunction with Bella to drive the Longbottom's mad.

As Crouch held Michael under the Cruciatus he conversationally turned to Bianca and said, "You know, I've done extensive research on this curse, and I must say you muggles and your feeble hearts don't stand up to it like witches and wizards.

Almost as if on cue Michael began to painfully grasp at his chest as he still screamed from the unbelievable pain he was in.

Bianca's screams of a different kind of agony alerted Winky to the pain of the elder Grangers and she popped into the living room waving her hand as she banished Crouch Jr. through a wall. His mad cackles never ceased as he arced through the air, in direct contrast to the pale and still form of Michael Granger lying on the floor.

In a show of remarkable strength Winky grabbed both Bianca and Michael and popped away to Hogwarts just as Crouch was returning to have some more fun.

Crouch glanced around the house and with an unnerving look in his eyes he destroyed the nearest outer wall of the house before he walked out and cackled, "Mosmordre."

As the green serpent sprang from his wand he ran a hand through his tousled sandy locks and apparated away, just as the faint sound of muggle policemen responding to the noise permeated the air.

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In Ottery St. Catchpole an actual spellfire fight was being fought in and around the Weasley family residence.

It was fortunate for Arthur and Molly that both Bill and Charlie had come back home due to Order business in the past couple of months.

The two younger wizards were very skilled in ways that belied their ages as they traded spells with the brothers Lestrangle.

Rodolphus Lestrangle smirked as he batted away a nasty looking orange curse fired from Bill. "Come now little Weasley, surely the big bad goblins have taught you much better than that."

Bill was completely unperturbed as he watched Charlie launch a spell at Rabastan, who had taken cover behind a large rock near the entrance of the Burrow's garden behind the house.

Charlie grunted as a piece of shrapnel lodged itself in his leg following a joint attack from the Death Eater brothers. Wincing slightly he pulled the piece from the mangled flesh of his thigh and grunted, "Suterus." The wound closed enough to stem any bleeding before the hardened dragon tamer turned to his older brother and said, "These two just don't know when to quit, do they?"

Bill gave Charlie a thin smile as the moonlight gleamed off of his flame red hair. "I just hope mum and dad are faring better against that loony cousin of Sirius's."

Charlie nodded and with a flourish of their wands twin beams of blue vaporized the rock the Lestrangle brothers had used as cover. They both glanced into the moonlit sky before sharing a look as they vanished with a pair of pops.

Bill and Charlie shared a brief look of consternation before glancing up to see the beacon of so much pain and hatred over their childhood home. The Dark Mark hung over the pair like a blanket of gut wrenching realization. After a moment to get past their shock they both took off at a sprint to the house, hopeful and yet fearful all rolled into one.

The sight that met them would haunt for many years to come. Molly Weasley was curled into a ball, the apparent victim of a prolonged Cruciatus curse. Their father, the man who had instilled their sense of right and wrong, was leaning heavily against a wall, a bloody stump all that was remaining for one hand while he bleed out from a gash in his chest.

Weakly he gurgled, "Boys check on your mother, make sure she is ok. I'll be fine."

Bill merely motioned Charlie to do as his father had requested before he gently wrapped his arms around his father, taking care to concentrate fully on his destination of St. Mungo's. He had a sinking feeling he wouldn't be the last on this night to be making such a trip.

.....

If the healers at St. Mungo's had thought themselves immune from being a direct target of Lord Voldemort's vengeance, then those thoughts were dispelled as the dark wizard portkeyed into the hospital along with one masked Death Eater whose only sign of identification was the long elegant cane with a snake head adorning it.

Placing powerful confundus charms over the security charms near the entrance of the ward Voldemort ensured he would have plenty of time to torture his specified targets without security coming to disrupt him. After all, it was terribly disappointing to be interrupted in the midst of some satisfying carnage.

Entering the ward for long term mental patients Voldemort quickly found his quarry, absently delving out the Cruciatus curse to many who were already foaming at the mouth from madness. He stopped after a couple of attempts, unsatisfied with the screams of those

unable to be driven mad through intense pain, considering they were already mad.

He reached his quarry and smiled evilly as he said, "Hello Frank and Alice, sorry I wasn't able to properly entertain you last time, but Bella has assured me you didn't lack in hospitality."

Lucius cackled as he sealed the ward shut to allow his lord to work while he absently put the Cruciatus on the peacock known as Gilderoy Lockhart. Although his lord was the one here on business, it didn't mean he couldn't have some fun also.

As the dark lord flourished his wand and began to attack the helpless couple he amended his previous thoughts as he added a stipulation. He found it rather pleasurable to destroy a mad person, especially if they had defied him in the past.

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Harry's scar still ached as he gazed at the common room fire on a chilly early autumn night. Hermione had returned and was sitting by his side as she read through a book on the goblin wars to supplement Binns' teachings. Most of the other students had long ago gone to bed, leaving a couple of seventh years studying for their N.E.W.T. examinations along with the two Gryffindor fifth year prefects in their own little world on the couch.

Rubbing at his scar absently Harry suddenly groaned and removed his glasses before burying his face in his arms. Hermione quickly marked her page before she turned concerned brown eyes to him and asked, "Is your scar bothering you that much Harry?"

Harry pulled his hands away from his face and Hermione gasped at the lurid red color of the scar. She reached out and gently brushed her knuckle against the scar only to pull her hand away immediately at the searing hot pain that spread through her hand.

She grasped Harry's hand tightly, its cold and clammy feel vastly different from his scar as she said, "Come on, we're going to the hospital wing."

Harry was too worn to do anything but nod as he was tugged from his seat and out of the common room, Hermione taking the time to banish their supplies back to the safety of their trunks.

It came as a surprise when they ran into a rather harried looking Professor McGonagall, suspicious looking moisture collecting at the corner of her eyes. They collided as Hermione nearly sprinted towards the hospital wing and after everyone was untangled McGonagall asked, "So you've heard already then. I'm so sorry my dear."

Hermione absolutely froze in her tracks. "Sorry about what professor?"

McGonagall wasn't one to be caught in a position that lacked such tact as she honestly replied, "Your father is in the hospital wing, he was attacked by a Death Eater. I also have to stop by and grab the Weasleys. I figured you'd heard because you were on your way in such a hurry."

Hermione shook her head, her eyes beginning to fill with panic as she replied, "No, I was taking Harry to see Madam Pomfrey. He was feeling rather poorly, with his scar and all."

McGonagall now looked at Harry and winced at how pale and frail he looked. She merely nodded and added, "Of course, well on with you then and I do hope your father recovers Ms. Granger." Her voice finished in a warm burr, belying her Scottish background.

With that Hermione redoubled her grip on Harry's hand, her sympathy for Harry was still present but suddenly outweighed with the worry for her father. Harry was barely maintaining consciousness, as it felt as though his skull was being torn open with an ice pick right at the point of his scar. He didn't particularly feel like being carried into the hospital wing, but he wanted to know the condition of Michael nearly as much as Hermione did.

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Madam Pomfrey had stabilized her two patients, one from a case of shock, the other from the equivalent of a heart attack when the doors swung open once more, revealing Hermione Granger and a very pale and weary looking Harry Potter. Before she could even speak however, Hermione had released Harry's hand and dashed towards her parents' beds, leaving Harry to sway before his eyes rolled back into his head and he fell rather ungracefully to the floor, unfortunately cutting his head open on the corner of a bed on the way down.

Hermione glanced up at the racket and apparently seeing her boyfriend bleeding on the floor was the final thing needed to release the dam holding back her flood of tears.

With a muffled sob she exclaimed, "Harry!"

Madam Pomfrey calmly floated her most frequent visitor to the bed nearest the Grangers before she quickly healed the gash on Harry's head and ran a few diagnostic spells. Satisfied that Harry wasn't in any more immediate danger; the matronly witch walked over to the sobbing Hermione and gently said, "Ms. Granger I have a nice calming draught for you to take and a sleeping draught to get you to sleep. You will still be the first one of this lot awake tomorrow, and then you can talk to everyone."

Hermione nodded, her face a splotchy mess as Madam Pomfrey took care to tuck the distraught witch into bed before tipping the calming draught and sleeping draught down her throat. As the last of the potions' effects took hold she turned her gaze towards Harry's bed and murmured, "Good night Harry. I love you."

.....

Albus Dumbledore was in quite the quandary, he needed to have the resources available to him as headmaster of Hogwarts to properly deal with the attacks of the night. As it was he only had the ability to talk to the portrait of Sirius's ancestor and former headmaster of Hogwarts Phineas Nigellus Black. The portrait in Grimmauld allowed him access of a manner to his office at Hogwarts.

He had used that access already to contact Minerva, circumvent the Floo connections that were still being policed by Fudge's lackeys, and organized the far flung Order members to meet at headquarters as soon as they could. Patronus messages were useful, but far too slow when attempting to communicate over long distances. Fawkes had just suffered through a burning day, and that left him only this method of communication, not as reliable as he would prefer, but such was the way of things.

He was broken from his musings when Phineas returned from his visit to Hogwarts and said, "Well Albus, it appears as though Ms. Granger's parents are in the hospital wing, followed quickly by Mr. Potter and the mud-and Ms. Granger."

Dumbledore frowned and was about to get a clarification on the condition of the hospital wing patients when Moody stomped into the room and gruffly said, "The Hog's Head has been burnt down Albus, and the Weasleys were attacked also. Aberforth is dead, and Arthur is apparently right on death's doorstep."

Dumbledore for once was too shocked to reply, instead he nodded numbly before he found his voice and said, "Thank you for telling me Alastor. Would you mind gathering as much information on the attacks as you can for the Order meeting later tonight?"

Moody merely grunted as he stomped out of the room to complete his requested task, he had a few favors to call in within the auror squads.

With Moody gone Dumbledore dropped his head into his aged hands and shed a few tears for his lost brother. He couldn't afford to show any weakness in front of anyone else, it had been engrained in him for far too long to act any other way.

.....

Hermione awoke the next morning feeling groggy as though she'd had a very involved dream, the contents of which were eluding her this early in the morning.

Opening her eyes she noticed she wasn't in her nice comfortable four post bed in the Gryffindor dorms, but rather in a stiff bed in the hospital wing...and that is when it hit her with full speed. Her parents had been attacked, and Harry was suffering through a scar attack.

She sat up so quickly in her bed that she got lightheaded momentarily before Madam Pomfrey's voice cut through the air. "Ms. Granger, sit still for a moment so that I can check up on you. I'll inform you of the condition of my other patients as I examine you."

Hermione obediently complied as Madam Pomfrey continued, "Mr. Potter should be waking up soon, although by all appearances all that he suffered were the aftereffects of a very nasty headache. So bad in fact he actually passed out once he reached my wing last night and got a nasty bump on his head. Nothing I couldn't handle however."

Hermione nodded somewhat relieved but still anxious to know about her parents, "Your mother was suffering from a nasty case of shock when your elf brought them in last night. She should be fine with a bit of bed rest today, but I fear the news she'll be receiving won't help."

Steeling herself Madam Pomfrey went fully into a state that all healers must be taught. "Your father on the other hand is in a very delicate state. He suffered the equivalent of a heart attack due to overexposure to the Cruciatus curse. While he was brought here quickly enough to ensure recovery, I've had to place him in a magical coma to allow his body to heal. While he should regain consciousness this evening, he will be rather frail for the next few weeks. Muggles don't bounce back quite as quickly as witches and wizards do."

Hermione nodded, feeling the damnable tears coming back again before she suppressed them with her iron will, the same one that had served her well growing up with the taunts of the other children in her primary school. She nodded, she had nothing to worry about, everyone was ok and they would get better, which was a fair show better than most that went up against Death Eaters.

Madam Pomfrey had apparently disappeared at some point and it was only the sound of a small pop that had broken her train of

thought. Winky was nervously twisting her small tea cozy dress as if waiting to be punished for something. Hermione immediately caught on to the direction of the tiny elf's thoughts as she said, "You did everything I asked you to Winky. My parents are still alive, and I have you to thank for it."

Winky didn't appear completely relieved at Hermione's proclamation but she did relax marginally. Hermione sighed and stepped out of her bed; she was still in her pajamas and in dire need of a shower. Winky, sensing a chance to be of some assistance offered, "Would Missus Hermione like some clean clothes and a brush for her hair?"

Hermione yawned but nodded before she added, "Grab my entire hygiene kit if you don't mind Winky. Madam Pomfrey has a shower in here somewhere I'm sure she won't mind me using."

Winky nodded and vanished with a much quieter pop this time, apparently on a mission to do something she viewed as worthwhile.

Hermione took the moment to walk over to Harry's bed and brush the long fringe of hair from his face. It was a cruel hand he had been dealt. Inexplicable pain and never-ending loss seemed to define the majority of his life; who was she to complain about a single part of her life?

It was then and there that Hermione Granger vowed to not only live for Harry Potter, but to make sure he never lacked for a single thing in his life ever again.

She leaned down and brushed a soft kiss across his chapped lips before the sound of opening doors alerted her to the presence of a large group of students. Turning she was startled to see Ron and the rest of the Weasley siblings with tears in their eyes.

Hermione was startled as Ron pulled her into a hug before he pulled away and wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. In a quiet subdued voice he said, "Sorry to hear about your mum and dad Hermione. But, what happened to Harry?"

Hermione frowned before she shrugged and threw all decorum out the window, "Voldemort."

The Weasleys all flinched in unison before Ron cleared his throat and said, "Bugger seems to be everywhere these days, doesn't he?"

Hermione sighed and sat down on the edge of Harry's bed. "I imagine this is what all of the adults experienced the first time around with Voldemort."

Ron nodded and ran a hand through his hair. "I reckon so." He started and stopped before he settled on, "I'm sorry about the Lavender thing, Herms. I shouldn't have said all of those things."

Hermione appreciated the gesture and waved away the necessity of it. "Don't worry about it Ron. If I wasn't such a busybody always sticking my nose in other people's business it wouldn't have been a problem."

Ron smiled sadly. "Well I reckon Harry and I would have been flunked out, if not dead, without your big nose a long time ago."

Hermione grinned as Ron continued somewhat more somberly, "Listen erm, I just wanted to stop by before we left and give you and your parents my best wishes. Tell Harry to get better too."

Hermione frowned and furrowed her brow. "Did you have somewhere else to go?"

Ron nodded grimly. "Death Eaters attacked the Burrow too, and my parents are in a right state according to Professor McGonagall. We're taking the Floo from her office and we might be gone for a few days."

Hermione then returned Ron's hug from earlier as she murmured into his shoulder, "Send word back to Hogwarts when you figure out how they are, ok?"

Ron nodded and with one last sickly smile the Weasleys all quietly turned on heel and left the hospital wing. Suddenly the world seemed to be a lot lonelier place.

A/N: So ends another chapter, and the next chapter will have us picking through the wreckage wrought by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Also, we'll be getting a brief bit of Quidditch, although I can't imagine Gryffindor will really have their hearts in it.

The reviews for this story have been dropping lately, and without review mongering too much I would like to see the reviews go back up as we progress.

Thanks to everyone that has read and reviewed so far, and I will try to reply to as many reviews as I can.

Question of the Chapter:

With the romance of Deathly Hallows notwithstanding, where would you rank the story in terms of plot out of the entire series?

St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries had been a very busy place during the first war with Voldemort, and for the second time in roughly 15 years the night of the attack and the following week had regained some of that manic fear.

Of all of the patients that had been admitted a week earlier, Arthur Weasley was in the worst state of the survivors. He had lost his left hand and had been hit by a strange variant of a cutting spell, which had opened a gash in his chest that the healers had yet to fully heal. The Healers had magically outfitted him with a reasonable prosthesis for his hand

Molly had been treated for her extended exposure to the Cruciatus, and while she still trembled from some of the aftereffects of the curse she had taken up vigil at her husband's bedside. The one distinguishing characteristic from her own attack was a streak of white that ran the length of her hair.

The entirety of the Weasley family, save Percy, was there and the positions they had taken spoke volumes about their personalities and role in the family dynamic. Bill, the eldest was standing opposite his mother on his father's left side, his shoulders squared with the door, his engrained protective nature showing through clearly. Charlie was nearest to the door, his broad shoulders and stocky build a firm reminder to any threats that he would be the first line of defense, the first one to call to arms as it were. He was nearly as protective as Bill, but with a nasty streak added in that the curse breaker had never developed. The twins were for once solemn, their mischievous smiles toned down as they spoke in quiet tones in the corner of the room, present but always somewhat distant due to the closely shared bond that only twins could have.

Ron's face was pale and it was in rare times like this that one could see just how much he cared about his family. Those naked moments of vulnerability were also present when he worried about his friends, but he had a much easier time covering those times up with a light statement that showcased his sense of humor.

Ginny was probably the most openly emotional of any of the children Weasley, but that was almost to be expected seeing as how she was

the only girl in the family. She was sitting at the foot of the bed staring down at her father's blanket covered foot. While she wasn't crying, she was sporting a very distressed look obscured by the long red hair covering her face.

All of the red haired clan's eyes shifted to the door as it opened, revealing a middle aged looking wizard wearing the green tunic robe that all St. Mungo's healers wore. The man looked very tired - weary would almost be a better description based upon the bags under his eyes and slouched posture he was wearing.

Quietly he asked, "So, how is our patient looking today?"

Molly answered in a hollow cheerful voice, "His color has improved today, which has to be a good sign." She finished on what could only be described as a desperately hopeful tone.

The healer flicked his wand and after a moment nodded with a small frown on his face. "Well, it certainly appears as though his vital signs are stabilizing. I'm still concerned about the wound on his chest though; it appears as though we'll have to call in a counter curse specialist from the continent. There is no telling what kind of effects it might have if left be for too long."

Molly managed to contain her grimace at the thought of additional expenses for a specialist from the continent. They were going to have to really skimp for the next couple of months to make do, but they would find a way like they always did. As long as Arthur would survive they would persevere.

.....

Outside of the insulated tube that was St. Mungo's, Cornelius Fudge's administration and legacy were dissolving even faster than he could have imagined. He had counted on the loyalty of his closest supporters, but when he truly needed Lucius Malfoy and Delores Umbridge, they had put him under the wheels of the Knight Bus.

A crumpled morning edition of the Prophet remained on his otherwise bare desk, the headline the reason he was now cleaning out his

belongings from the office he had inhabited for over five years. The headline flashed almost mockingly:

Umbridge Speaks Out: Fudge Bullies Supporters to Ruin Hogwarts

Frowning, Fudge finished his packing before he smoothed out the crumpled paper and read it one more time, as if it would offer him some closure or, less likely, a possibility of reassurance that it was all just a misunderstanding. The incontrovertible truth still remained; it could not be denied now that Umbridge had sold him down the river in exchange for her own political livelihood.

Wryly Fudge acknowledged that he had done the same as he leapfrogged his own political mentor, Barty Crouch Sr. Of course, whoever took over for him would have the unenviable job of being a wartime Minister as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would plant a giant bulls-eye on his successor.

His secretary entered the room, well aware that she also would be searching for a new job before the day was out. Softly she asked, "Do you need my help for anything else Minister?"

Fudge shook his head and hesitated a moment before giving the woman a quick hug. "Thank you for everything Jeanette." The fair-haired woman smiled slightly. While the man was an incompetent Minister, he was a soft hearted man in person.

Jeanette quietly left the office, leaving the door open as she went. Fudge flicked his wand and the numerous boxes filled with the detritus of his office vanished into the ether. Reaching into his robes pocket he grasped the resignation speech he was about to make in front of the fully assembled Wizengamot.

After that he would spend some time out of the spotlight before he reassessed future political aspirations. If Barty Crouch could reinvent himself, then so would he and he would deal with people like Delores Umbridge in due time.

.....

At Grimmauld Place it had been a week since Voldemort had launched some very specific and personal attacks. The Order had finished their reports on the specifics of the attack and now things had settled into the wait for a new minister, one hopefully more sympathetic to their cause, to be appointed.

Sirius and Remus were sitting at the main table in the parlor room, reminiscing about the old days and remembering some of their more recent adventures.

"I'm telling you Padfoot, James wouldn't have stood a chance in a race with Harry. From the little I saw of him a couple of years ago, I'd swear he was born on a broom."

"I'm sure James probably suggested it at some point to Lily. Of course that didn't take into account Lily's take on the matter," Sirius offered with a wry grin on his face.

Remus chuckled mirthfully before he took a drink of his morning tea and sobered. "I know this is terrible, but have you ever really sat down and compared Harry and James?"

Sirius rubbed the back of his neck embarrassedly before he replied, "Honestly, the first thing I did after I got away with Beakie was compare my mental picture of what Harry would be, namely a miniature version of Prongs, to the reality of what he was actually like."

Remus nodded. "I didn't actually do it until after his fall during the Quidditch match. I kept waiting for him to play up his injuries to the nearest girl that would listen. But, the first thing he did was ask if they had won the match."

Sirius chuckled. "Well technically he did already have a girl that had claimed him in a manner of speaking."

Remus snorted as he took a drink of his tea, barely managing to avoid spraying Sirius with some hot Earl Grey. Finally managing a response he retorted, "I figured if the boy was the least bit interested in that young woman they would get together sooner rather than later."

I mean it isn't often a 14-year-old witch sees her best friend dead in a wedding tuxedo for her boggart, is it?"

Sirius shook his head. "Just goes to show you Moony, that you still haven't a clue how the female mind works."

Remus grinned as he took a bite of the scone on his plate. "I concede the point Padfoot."

Sirius nodded, a pensive look on his face. "It was when I mentioned to Harry that we might live together that I knew he was different from James. His eyes, Merlin his eyes were basically begging to see if I was being serious. So much naked need to be accepted and loved there Moony, and he was only a 13-year-old kid. If I knew I could get away with it, I'd make a short trip to visit those blasted muggles."

Remus nodded his agreement before changing the topic. "So, two days until we see the Winged Potter take flight against Hufflepuff. Any bets as to how long it takes before he finds the snitch?"

Sirius grinned in reply. "That's a sucker's bet Moony, with his enhanced senses as a panther it should be over in five minutes if not less."

Remus looked thoughtful for a moment before he shook his head in disagreement. "Could he finish it that fast? Yes, I'm sure he could. Will he do so when they play Hufflepuff, and incidentally Cedric Diggory? No, I can't imagine he would, especially seeing as how it will be the last time they play together."

Sirius shook his head and replied. "I don't think that will matter to Harry, he'll want to finish up quickly so he can get his victory snog from Hermione."

Remus merely smirked. "So what do you say, twenty galleons to the winner? Twenty minutes or less and you win, and anything more and I'm the winner."

Sirius merely nodded before he took a sip of his coffee and stared straight ahead. It was a pleasant distraction from the horrors of the previous two days, but that's all it really was.

.....

Things at Hogwarts were rapidly changing, and for the most part all of the news was of a positive nature due to Umbridge stepping down as Headmistress and High Inquisitor.

Hermione felt like a sponge that had been squeezed dry and stretched beyond its means to the point of never returning to its original shape. Her family had gotten off easily, but there had been other attacks that had been completely successful, such as the assault on Hog's Head Tavern and attacks at both Longbottom Manor and Amelia Bones' house. Not that the head of the DMLE had been killed, but she had been viciously assaulted by the same werewolf that had turned Remus when he was a young child, Fenrir Greyback. Fortunately, Greyback hadn't been completely transformed and she wouldn't suffer the same fate as many others had. Neville's gran had been killed and his parents had been sent even further into madness, their only signs of being alive the foaming at the mouth they did every few hours.

Her father, a man who had the energy and spunk of a man ten years his junior, had suffered a heart attack after being placed under the Cruciatus curse. While Winky had managed to get both her mother and father away with all of their irreplaceable possessions, the house had been destroyed and it would take time before the insurance agency could get to work on providing the money for a new house. Her father was now conscious and being pampered by both Dobby and Winky, to an extent where even Bianca would leave her healing husband to the gentle devices of the house elves for a few hours at a time.

Of course that wasn't even the worst of it, the worst being the headmaster's insistence that her parents go to Australia under assumed identities, faking their own deaths, at least as far as the wizarding world was concerned. The illusion was intended to include a fake funeral and a scheduled bereavement leave to visit some other

family in Australia, when in reality she would be helping her parents settle into their new life.

Now however, she was taking the rare opportunity of showing her muggle mother around a castle impregnable from the outside to muggles by muggle repelling charms. Of course this was all under the guise of her prefect duties, guiding a visiting witch of some importance on a tour of the castle, feeding into the myth that Hermione Granger wouldn't allow even her parents' untimely death to prevent her from completing her assigned duties.

"Hermione, would you please show me the loo where Harry and Ron saved you from the troll?" Bianca quietly requested as they went up the changing staircases that littered the school.

Hermione nodded and at the next floor they got off, on their way to the final destination of a rarely frequented girls loo. Bianca walked around the room as if it was a museum exhibit; she looked for any sign of the troll's destruction from several years earlier. Magic had done a good job of removing any physical signs, but the room still held an electric feel to it, as if magic much greater than what was normally taught at the school was performed there. Even being a muggle Bianca knew that what the three friends shared was as magical a start to a friendship as existed anywhere.

Growing up Hermione had always been a quiet little girl, only raising her voice when she got excited about learning something new, a trait that had earned her no friends from the other children in her primary school. Most of her peers had viewed this as Hermione being an insufferable know-it-all, although the truth was that Hermione had little to no understanding of how to communicate her eagerness to learn and share it with others.

Then Bianca's little girl's Hogwarts letter came and it had created a chasm between her parents and the little girl that had always needed the simple reassurance that she deserved friends and love despite being a know-it-all. Magic had given her baby that self assurance, and it had given her friendships that would last a lifetime, however long that might be.

Therein lay the other problem that Bianca had discerned from the magical world. The danger and death in her daughter's world was far beyond what a normal parent would be able to tolerate. Of course she also discerned that magical people were a much more resilient lot than non-magical ones, especially if Hermione's tales about Harry's exploits on a broom could be trusted. It was all such a foreign and detached world, and most of her maternal instincts screamed at her to get Hermione out of the school while she still could. Sadly, she knew Hermione wouldn't stand for any such high handed behavior, she'd just as soon work to be emancipated.

Hermione had watched her mother for a few minutes before her mind wandered to that Halloween night a few years in the past, how she had gone from feeling the loneliest in her life, to a life filled with friendship and love. She honestly had believed she was about to die in the girl's loo, especially after she heard someone lock the door from the outside. Of course being 12 years old, friendless, and ostracized had meant that the idea of death hadn't scared her nearly as much then as it did now when she had something to lose.

Now everything she had gained was about to cost her parents the very life they had been building for nearly twenty years. They would be uprooted to Australia, and it had only been due to an impassioned plea by her alone that her parents were spared the messiness of a temporary memory charm.

"Hermione love, are you absolutely certain this is the life you want?" Bianca's voice cut through her vaguely depressing thoughts.

Hermione shook her head, and in a voice that indicated a long running argument on this very topic she replied, "Mum, even if I wasn't on the front lines of this with Harry I still couldn't just deny this part of my life."

Bianca was flailing at this point, grasping for something to keep her only child as safe as she possibly could. "But, but what are your father and I to do?" she frantically asked in a shrill sounding voice.

Hermione sighed heavily. In a way a part of her indeed felt as if she was abandoning her parents, but the other more logical and clinical

part resolutely pushed that away. Her parents had no chance in a confrontation with a Death Eater.

"Mum, you know that I love both you and Daddy very much. If you were to die because of who I am, well I'd never forgive myself." Hermione explained in a strained voice.

Bianca gaped for a moment allowing Hermione to push home her point more easily. "You saw what happened to Dad, and you can only imagine what could have happened to you. It might be selfish of me to keep you and Dad away from that until this is all over, but it's all I have right now."

Bianca sniffed, rubbing at her eyes with the cuffs of her robes. This all felt so wrong, so backwards to what should be happening. As she struggled to regain her composure a pair of welcome arms wrapped around her and murmured, "I'll always be your little girl Mum, but I need to do this."

Bianca nodded as she broke the hug, and gave a strained smile. "I know Sweetheart, and your father and I will support it. Stiff upper lip and what not."

Hermione was almost faint with relief that the conversation hadn't taken a different turn. Shaking off those negative thoughts she smiled, almost mischievously, and said, "How about we get ready for the Quidditch match tomorrow? I think I have a spare Gryffindor Quidditch jersey you can wear. I'll just wear the one Harry bought me at the World Cup instead. If we hurry Lavender and Ginny can regale you with some of their magical make over tips."

Bianca managed a small smile at her daughter's sudden enthusiasm, suddenly seeing a normal teenage girl who wanted to have some time to bond with her mother over the most important of things - girl talk and a bit of pampering. For all of the amazing things she had seen magic do, this one was the most important at the moment.

.....

It was a rare windy day for the first Quidditch match of the season, pitting Hufflepuff house against Gryffindor. The school had largely returned to normal. Dumbledore had returned quietly from his brief absence as Headmaster, the resignation of Minister Cornelius Fudge taking up much more press and attention of the wizarding populace even than the return of Lord Voldemort.

Umbridge was still present but she was almost like a severely wounded animal, having shut herself away in her office save the times she still taught class. Of course everyone at the school keenly felt the missing students who were seeing to services of dead relatives, or in the Weasleys' case an ailing family member.

For that reason alone, the Gryffindor Quidditch team would be without a Weasley in the lineup for the first possible time since Charlie Weasley had first taken the seeker position in his third year. Thusly the Gryffindor lineup had been in a state of constant practice for the past three days breaking in two new beaters and one new chaser.

McLaggen had taken his starting role as keeper without any of the tact and quiet respect the rest of the team had expected, in fact he had loudly trumpeted his starting turn as the ascension to a throne of sorts. As it was, the desperation of the situation forced all of the older students to merely tolerate the sixth year's pompous attitude.

All of that seemed to fade away when Harry finally took to the air on his Firebolt, the same rush of competitive fire as always flashing in his eyes. The crowd erupted as it always did for the Boy-Who-Lived, the loudest cheers coming from a bushy haired witch and an apparent visiting witch of some importance.

In the Ravenclaw section a loud roar erupted and the blonde witch that was the source of the noise held a large magical sign that flashed a simple message:

Win for Ronald

Harry's eyes couldn't help but catch sight of the large flashing sign and he managed a small nod for Luna much to the jealousy and anger of many other single witches in the crowd.

An amused baritone pulled him from his usual pre-match mental inventory. "So Harry, it seems you have admirers in Ravenclaw."

Harry chuckled and replied, "Nah, this time it's an admirer for Ron."

Cedric glanced down before he nodded. "Ah of course, Luna Lovegood, isn't it?"

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, she is definitely a bit different."

Cedric smiled sadly. "She wasn't always like that, it happened after her mother died. My mum was good friends with her mum."

Harry circled around in the air for a moment pondering this before he pinched the bridge of his nose as he pushed his glasses up. "That might explain her behavior." Shaking his head he grinned and asked, "Ready to lose?"

Cedric shook his head. "Well, while there shouldn't be any dementors today I think I still have the last win between us."

Harry's grin became somewhat more determined before he offered, "Well, let's give them all a proper show then, shall we?"

Cedric took a hand from his broom and gave Harry a jaunty salute. "Capital idea old chap."

Harry chuckled as Cedric returned to his Hufflepuff teammates for some last minute instructions, while Harry merely met the eyes of Angelina and Katie nodding, given he already knew exactly what he was needed for.

Madam Hooch hovered right at the center line of the pitch and with the aid of a sonorous spell announced, "Captains please shake hands!"

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Cedric and Angelina did as instructed before the snitch, bludgers, and quaffle were released signaling the start of the match. As Harry zipped high into the sky to have a better chance at spotting the snitch Hermione turned to her mother and explained, "The seeker has several roles to fill on the Quidditch pitch."

Seamus chuckled and nudged Dean before he exclaimed, "Hermione Granger explaining Quidditch to someone, whatever is the world coming to?"

Hermione pointedly ignored the comment as she continued, "Harry is probably the best seeker in the school at catching the snitch, but there are other things the seeker has to help manage. They have to coordinate their actions with the beaters to avoid their own teammates being pelted by a misplaced bludger. They also have to make sure the opposing seeker never gets so far away as to allow a free run at the snitch if it appears. You can see Cedric Diggory is staying about 100 meters away from Harry, which is still close enough should Harry spot the snitch that Cedric can catch him."

Lee Jordan's voice broke above the noise of the crowd. "The last time these two teams played it required a Dementor attack on Harry Potter to allow a Hufflepuff victory. Although in all fairness the Hufflepuff seeker did offer a rematch, which was not allowed by the rules."

McGonagall made no move to chastise Lee on this point; it was a widely held belief that it was indeed Gryffindors' match to lose had it not been for the interference of the guards of Azkaban.

Bianca watched in awe as the various teenagers swooped through the sky passing the quaffle and hitting bludgers back and forth. It filled Hermione with a foreign and yet welcome warmth to have a chance to share something so magical with her mother. All of the times in the past when she had written letters pertaining to Harry's Quidditch heroics, it had always failed to capture the terror and exhilaration she felt watching the games.

Lee's voice once again cut over the noise. "McMillan scores on a nice feed from Smith. Hufflepuff leads 40-30 as McLaggen has yet to make a save."

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Remus and Sirius were watching in the staff and guest stands, Hagrid having joined them instead of taking his normal place in the Gryffindor stands with Hermione.

Remus glanced down at his watch fighting a smirk as he said, "Five more minutes Padfoot, and then those galleons are mine."

Sirius was bouncing on the balls of his feet like many of the students were but he still managed to reply, "Oh sod the galleons, Harry just needs to catch the snitch before it gets too much out of hand."

Hagrid chimed in as well, "Sure do wish the Weasleys 'ad been 'ere."

Sirius nodded. "Yes this McLaggen kid is absolute rubbish. From what Harry told me Ron could be as good as Oliver Wood with a bit of time."

Remus tutted, "While he does appear to be having a hard time of it, I do think calling him rubbish is a bit harsh." Sirius merely rolled his eyes, clearly conveying his thoughts on the matter without offering anything further to the conversation.

.....

Harry had been scanning the skies for nearly twenty minutes and he had patiently watched an inferior team take advantage of a substandard keeper like McLaggen apparently was during games. Fortunately the Gryffindor girls had been brilliant on the chaser line keeping the match within twenty points, meaning as always it would come down to him to win the match for the team.

Contrary to popular opinion he could not see things that much more clearly due to his animagus form. Any advantage he might have gained in hearing was nullified by the boisterous crowd. What he did have was the superior broom, a keen enough eye, and a desire to win the match that typically dwarfed the opposing seeker's same desire.

Cedric had been doing his level best of staying close to Harry, all the while directing his troops from above as the captain. Harry really didn't think he could do as well in the same position, but then again Cedric was a born leader and from what he remembered the older boy thrived in such situations.

Grasping the handle of his Firebolt Harry darted towards the opposite end of the pitch, fortunate enough that Cedric was in the middle of bellowing out a new play for the chaser line. As he reached mid-pitch a glint of gold darted up through the Hufflepuff hoops and the chase was on.

The crowd's cheers spurred Harry on as Cedric desperately tried to catch up on his Nimbus 2000, the same broom his father had bought him for his 15th birthday. Harry however, was pulling away as he corkscrewed down towards the ground as the snitch took a sudden downturn. The crowd gasped as Harry flattened out less than five feet from the ground his Quidditch robes almost dragging on the pitch as he zipped along.

Cedric had caught up somewhat as they flattened out due to the more maneuverable Nimbus broom, and now it was possible if he took a better line he could take the snitch from Harry for a second time. The snitch continued to zip along just barely above the pitch as the Hufflepuff beaters sent a bludger towards Harry. Harry did a last second barrel roll to avoid the bludger, a move which drew a lot of gasps from the assembled crowd.

Lee was in heaven as he announced, "Harry Potter somehow avoids the bludger sent by the Hufflepuff beaters. That was a professional quality move right there folks."

Harry of course was too absorbed in catching the snitch to notice anything other than something moving hard and fast from the corner of his eye. A quick barrel roll and he continued his pursuit, Cedric was closing slowly, but if he didn't mess up it would be over before Cedric could catch it.

As Harry inched out on his broom the snitch began to take off straight up. Seeing this would be his chance to end the match Harry took his stabilizing hand from the broom and stood up on the Firebolt, vaulting himself from the broom as the tip of its handle dropped to the ground. With a swipe of his hand he captured the snitch.

As he clasped his right hand around the struggling snitch he pulled his wand with his other hand and pointed it at himself. "Arresto Momentum." With the aid of the spell Harry hit the ground at a tumble at only roughly ten miles per hour, which was enough to result in a sprained right ankle and a bit of a grass burn.

Lee Jordan's voice broke out in jubilant glee. "Harry Potter has captured the snitch, Gryffindor wins 210-90!"

Madam Pomfrey was down on the pitch in a flash and was mending Harry's ankle when Hermione and Bianca followed close behind looking slightly winded but not much the worse for wear.

Hermione breathlessly asked, "You crazy idiot, does every Quidditch match have to end with you injured?"

Harry chuckled. "I've sprained my ankle on the trick step to Gryffindor Tower Hermione, so I wouldn't exactly call this an injury."

Throwing all of her usual rules of propriety to the wind Hermione grasped Harry's Quidditch robes and pulled him into a deep kiss. Bianca finally managed to separate them as she dryly said, "Now that you've checked to see if the boy needs his tonsils out, I think Madam Pomfrey would like to check him over in the hospital wing."

Sirius grinned as he suggested, "Maybe Harry needs a different kind of healing?"

Bianca narrowed her eyes, "I think not Sirius."

Harry barked out a laugh at his godfather's antics as the group slowly gathered and began to head back towards the castle. They met Cedric halfway back to the school with a small smile on his face,

"Good match Harry, now promise me you are going to take the piss out of Slytherin."

Harry nodded. "I'll do what I can mate."

Cedric slapped Harry on the back before he let the group pass. As head boy he had to ensure that all of the students were on the grounds before he could shower after the match.

As they approached the castle the doors to the Great Hall swung open revealing the frantic pair of Ron and Ginny. Ron, the same boy who Quidditch meant everything to, took one glance at Harry before he gasped out, "Dad's taken a turn for the worse, and Mum wants all of the Weasleys honorary and otherwise to get to St. Mungo's."

Without sparing a glance to anyone else Harry and Hermione took off at a sprint behind Ron and Ginny, Harry's mended ankle and perhaps some post match snogging suddenly forced to the back burner.

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A/N: Not a lot happening this chapter, but next chapter things will start heating up with both Mr. Weasley and Harry's 'little' study group.

I already have the next several chapters outlined, so I know exactly where this story is going, all that need be done is write it...

Happy Early Birthday to Hermione Granger ... if I don't get another chapter out beforehand.

Thanks to everyone that took the time to review last chapter, and thanks for reading.

Disclaimer: It's JKR's not mine...I mean if it was mine I'd probably have a little bit more money.

A/N: Well here we are, another chapter, let's see if I can get this and the next one posted before Thanksgiving! I make some assumptions as to wizard/witch physiology this chapter, and they will be an issue again in the story. Sorry about the long delay, I shall strive to get the updates rolling with regularity again.

Thanks to chem prof for his superb beta work this chapter.

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Delores Umbridge was a political survivor; she had survived the rise and fall of two other ministers of magic and she would do so again. She always had a contingency plan to protect her political career and with some aid from a friend in the DMLE she had filed a block on any employment termination attempts at Hogwarts. In her mind staying at Hogwarts and keeping her nose clean for the rest of the year was the only way she could completely clear herself of Fudge and still keep face.

Just the same, she would find a way of dealing with Potter and his ilk even if she did have to get her hands a little dirty to do so. The Blood Quill was out of the question now, so she would have to be more subtle. As she sent off the official letter requesting a legal block of any termination attempts in her employment, a plan began to sift through her mind. With an evil looking smile she began to make preparations.

.....

St. Mungo's was finally settling back into a quiet period following Voldemort's series of attacks; in fact the only remaining patient was a Ministry employee by the name of Arthur Weasley. The man had been hit by an unknown curse that was somehow infected despite the best efforts of the healers. The infection had finally begun to spread and the infection was unaffected by medicine of both magical and muggle means.

It wouldn't be long before Arthur's blood would be, for the lack of a better word, toxic, and the infection would spread to his heart and lungs. While cases like this were very rare, they did happen, and when every resource had been expended the healers would inform the spouse or next of kin.

Master Healer Ambrose Pullman had approached Molly Weasley less than four hours ago and the conversation had been one of the strangest he had ever participated in.

Flashback

"Mrs. Weasley, your husband's condition has worsened."

Molly didn't visibly react, but if one had been looking into her eyes at that exact moment they would have seen something irretrievably lost in the woman. "Exactly what does that mean Healer Pullman?"

Healer Pullman put both of his hands into his healer's tunic. "Mr. Weasley has been a most unusual patient. The unknown curse he was struck with was designed to attack the victim on two levels. Obviously it is a derivation of a piercing curse, but upon contact with flesh the curse attacks the victim as a necrotic infection of sorts. But, instead of attacking the flesh, it instead has been attacking your husband's immune system."

Seeing Molly's confused expression he explained. "Magical people have much more efficient immune systems than muggles, simply because magic enhances everything in the human body. This curse has been unusual because it has been attacking both your husband's magic and the immune system. As a result his wound has become infected and nothing has worked for treatment. We will try some combination techniques this afternoon, but you need to prepare for the worst."

Molly nodded blankly as the healer quietly left the room; her gaze shifted over to her ailing husband and she felt her world falling apart. Pulling deep into her reserves she sniffed once to forestall the tears that wanted to come. She needed to contact all of her children, both of her body and of her heart.

.....

Using the FLOO connection in the headmaster's office, Harry, Hermione and the Weasley siblings went directly to the main lobby of St. Mungo's. Security had been increased since the hospital had been attacked, and each and every one of them went through a wand checkpoint where they were frisked for any additional weapons.

As they finally passed through, the initial numb feeling from hearing that Arthur was doing worse had finally lifted and it was a very glum group that entered the room to spend some time with the sick man.

The Weasley siblings took their spots almost automatically, their constant presence in the room supporting their father the only way they could. Harry and Hermione went to the far corner, where Hermione nestled herself between Harry's legs as he wrapped his arms around her.

Molly appeared somewhat bolstered by her children's presence as she explained in a restrained voice, "The curse your father was hit with has caused an infection and so far no treatments have worked. The healers have told me that unless one of their treatments today takes hold, the infection will spread to his lungs and heart."

The twins in a very quiet and serious tone of voice broke the silence following. "We'll go to the library to see if there is anything that we can do."

"There has to be a similar case of this somewhere."

"And when we find it, these healers will be very sorry."

Molly simply answered, "If you think it would help to do that then you can go back to Hogwarts now. But, make sure you hug your father before you leave." Fred and George did exactly that before they dashed from the room, needing to do something other than waiting for the inevitable.

With the twins gone, the parties present in the room lapsed into a fretful silence before Harry asked, "Mrs. Weasley, do you remember anything from the curse that hit Mr. Weasley?"

Molly sighed and rubbed at her eyes. "I've only retained bits and pieces of that night, and I've told everything to the healers I could. The Cruciatus I was placed under corrupted my memory so that it can't be placed in a pensieve. The only color I can remember from that night is blue, and then that mad woman laughing; her voice still haunts me in my nightmares."

Harry's brow was furrowed before his eyes lit up and he whispered something into Hermione's ear inaudible to the rest of the room. Hermione frowned and whispered something softly in reply; the look of devastation on Harry's face conveyed the general substance of their little conversation to everyone else in the room.

Just the same Molly asked, "Do you know what curse it was dear?"

Harry sighed. "Well, kind of. The curse obviously was a piercing curse from your description, but Hermione reminded me that there are many variations of the piercing curse, and most of them you would only find in dark arts books. Hermione and I did look through a few of the dark arts books in the Black library, and I can think of at least fifteen variations on the piercing curse, and none of them would act like the one Mr. Weasley was hit with."

Hermione added, "I'm sure the healers here could do something useful with these books if we could get them from Snuffle's place."

Molly nodded as she stood. "I'll go make a FLOO call to Albus, and organize an escort for you." Harry and Hermione nodded as Molly bustled away, looking far more hopeful now than she had earlier.

Ron sighed heavily and said, "You two don't know anything the healers haven't already tried. We've been here as they went over at least 50 counter curses for piercing charms. But, at least you are trying to do something. I feel pretty useless right now, just watching my dad fade away."

Harry softly replied, "You need to be here for your mum mate. So trust me, you are doing something." Ron frowned but nodded before he glanced over at Ginny, whose face was ashen as she was apparently lost in a memory of some sort.

A moment later Molly returned and she simply said, "Albus is going to look over the library personally, so you two don't need to make a trip."

Harry and Hermione nodded as Molly continued, "Albus tells me that you won the Quidditch match today?"

Hermione grinned. "Harry made a brilliant catch of the snitch." Her brow furrowed. "Actually, Harry should have his ankle looked at, he did twist it a bit making the catch."

Harry shrugged. "It's a little stiff, but nothing too bad. I'll make sure Madam Pomfrey looks at it when we get back to Hogwarts."

Molly seemed somewhat relieved to be worrying over something other than her husband as she ushered Harry to a chair, not even flinching as Hermione took up residence on Harry's lap.

Talk of the Quidditch match seemed to bring Ron around. "So McLaggen must have played well if you won, right?"

Harry grinned. "Nah, he was rubbish and I doubt he gets another start if you can get in any practices before our next match in the first week of November."

Ron sighed in relief. "Well, that's some good news at least. Just think Harry, no dementors and you beat Diggory to the snitch no problem."

Harry shifted Hermione slightly and replied, "Cedric is a decent seeker considering that he is flying around on a Nimbus 2000. You have to remember the Firebolt is still the standard broom for professional seekers, and it has been out for over two years."

Ron conceded the point to a certain degree. "The broom helps Harry, but someone less skilled wouldn't be able to use it with any success."

You play a style closer to professional level than any other seeker I've ever seen at Hogwarts, save Krum."

Harry merely nodded; he was happy to keep Ron's mind off of the unpleasant reality of his father dying at this very moment. Hermione gently untangled herself from Harry's arms and walked over to Ginny before pulling the smaller girl into a hug and whispering into her ear about something important.

Fifteen minutes turned into an hour before Molly returned. She looked rather defeated as she said, "Albus couldn't find anything new, and the healers have already tried to counter every piercing curse that he found in the Black family library, and his own personal library. The healers will be coming soon to try their last treatment combinations. I'd like for you children to return to school. I'll be sure to send word if Arthur's condition changes."

Ginny finally spoke for the first time since they had arrived as she embraced her mother and said, "I love you and Daddy."

Molly sniffed and hugged her only daughter tightly before the others also hugged the Weasley matron and quietly left the room, feeling emotionally drained and only wishing to have a nice quiet night in Gryffindor tower.

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Back at Hogwarts the group was all contemplative and quiet, although Harry's silence was perhaps a little more. He was tired of feeling disconnected from this war, and he needed to do something to contribute in his own way. Seeing Mr. Weasley lying so still in his bed only reinforced the same feelings he had been dealing with, and fortunately he had the perfect means of making himself useful.

Hermione had her legs spread out on the couch in the common room with her feet in Harry's lap as she read and he stared into the fire deep in thought. Harry finally snapped his gaze over to his girlfriend and he quietly asked, "How soon can we organize the first meeting of our defense study group?"

Hermione smiled slowly before she reached into a pocket and pulled a small notebook out. "I have all of the designated invitees planned, and I have an oath planned that will guarantee privacy of the group. With Umbridge being knocked down a couple of pegs I removed some of the more penal aspects for attempting to break the oath."

Harry nodded. "Good, but I still want to keep this quiet because we need to keep numbers down if we want to actually teach some spells worth learning."

Hermione arched her eyebrow. "This isn't just going to be a study group any more, is it?"

Harry sighed heavily. "You saw Mr. Weasley today Hermione, you tell me."

Hermione merely nodded before she pulled her feet out of Harry's lap and curled up against his side like a bigger version of Crookshanks. They both knew that moments like these were going to be harder to come by, so they enjoyed the rest of the evening the best they could and stayed up until the fire began to die.

Barty Crouch Sr. was of two minds due to the recent attacks by Voldemort. The human side of him was appalled at the needless death inflicted by the madman and his followers. Spending a few years with his son after his role in freeing the boy from Azkaban had convinced him that Voldemort was an evil that needed to be dealt with. His son, the energetic and intelligent boy he had sent off to Hogwarts, no longer existed, in his place a rabid dog that reveled in pain, both self inflicted and to those that opposed his lord.

On the other hand the politician in him saw nearly boundless opportunities following Fudge's resignation, and perhaps a bump up in the Ministry power structure. Amelia would be in St. Mungo's for another couple of weeks, but that wouldn't stop him from taking steps to place himself in an enviable position for the next series of elections.

As it stood, Dumbledore was currently the titular head of the magical government, while in actuality the government merely operated in a business as usual manner. He needed to play his cards carefully, because while he could gain much in the coming weeks, he could also tip his hand and lose it all.

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Two days passed at Hogwarts before any more word on Mr. Weasley was heard, and the news wasn't terribly encouraging. The new treatments hadn't stopped the infections, but they had slowed them down enough that the healers were somewhat encouraged.

It was with this in mind that the introductory meeting of Harry's defense study group met in the Room of Requirement. Each house was represented, with fifteen students coming to be taught defense by the most battle tested student in the school, Harry Potter, with his assistant for the lessons being Hermione Granger, the consensus selection for brightest witch of her age.

As the students met at the requested spot on the seventh floor, a door swung open seemingly out of the wall revealing Harry, and with a smirk he said, "Glad to see you all could make it. Come inside and we'll begin."

The group of fifth year students and one forth year (Ginny) collectively shrugged and entered the room, most looking around curiously having passed by this spot at some point in their time at Hogwarts, never having expected a room to be here.

Ginny frowned and loudly said, "You know, the twins said there was a broom closet right about here one time, but we didn't believe them. They said they ducked in here to get away from Filch one night."

Harry grinned and replied, "Well this doesn't look like a broom closet to me."

Ginny narrowed her eyes speculatively but took one of the seats the room had provided. Harry and Hermione were up front next to a lectern quietly discussing something before the raven haired wizard

nodded and cleared his throat. "Thanks for coming everyone; uh I figured I'd open the floor to questions before we get started tonight."

Parvati shouted out the first question. "Why are there Slytherins here?"

Harry sighed. "I think you all need to understand something. Slytherin does not necessarily mean Death Eater. The Death Eater that betrayed my parents was a Gryffindor. Blaise and Daphne have just been unlucky enough to be in the same generation as a Malfoy and they have been lumped in with the git." Harry didn't feel the need to add that Malfoy likely wasn't a Death Eater either, at least for now, and all it would accomplish is confuse the situation further.

"Did you really duel You-Know-Who last year after you won the Tri-Wizard tournament?" Kevin Entwhistle, a fifth year Ravenclaw asked.

Harry nodded. "His name is Voldemort, but um yes I did duel him. He would have killed me if not for a little bit of luck, and the headmaster's phoenix coming for me. While he is powerful, he is not invincible and I did manage to get some spells in on him."

Everyone that didn't know Harry had wide eyes upon this admission and he hastened to add, "I was privately tutored by Professor Moody quite a bit last year, and he taught me some Auror level offensive and defensive spells. I wasn't just throwing disarming hexes and stunning spells at him, and if you want to have a chance against a Death Eater, you'll have to learn similar spells and how to utilize them in an attack."

Ernie McMillan broke the heavy silence. "I say chap, I thought this was just a study group"

Harry stifled a sigh at the question. Ernie really was a pompous git sometimes. "It is a study group Ernie. You will all be prepared for the practical defense part of the OWL examinations by the end of the year, and you'll also have the ability to defend yourselves against a Death Eater should you be confronted with one outside of Hogwarts. OWL scores are pretty meaningless if you aren't alive to use them."

There was some nervous shifting at being reminded in such plain language that war was upon them, even if they were somewhat removed from it while at Hogwarts. Harry squirmed for a moment before Hermione smiled at him encouragingly.

"Listen, I'm not going to lie to you and tell you that we are all safe, because the adults can not take care of this. The adults have had their chance, and they have failed for the most part. Death Eaters either want to kill you or torture you depending on their homicidal mood of the day." Harry took a deep breath and he plowed on.

"Dementors will make your skin crawl, and you'll relive the worst moments of your life in detail before they suck your soul out. But, I will teach you a charm that will give you time to escape by repelling them." Most of the faces looked very interested about this.

"Voldemort is pure evil. He told me when I was a first year that there was no good and evil, only power and those willing to take it. He was lying. He is evil because he sacrificed everything to be powerful, and he killed anyone that was in his way. Don't duel Voldemort if you are unfortunate enough to come across him, try to hold him off until you can find a means of escape." Harry finished feeling somewhat relieved that the worst part of the meeting was over.

Hermione stepped next to his side. "Secrecy is still important for our meetings, and I've arranged for a means of contacting you for a meeting time. Additionally, I've made a reasonably simple privacy oath up on this parchment. If you try to inform anyone of the meetings, you will deal with some benign punitive measures."

Hermione set the parchment on a desk and Harry motioned them to sign. "If you aren't comfortable with the parchment, you can feel free to leave now with no hard feelings." The line quickly formed, and everyone present, save Harry and Hermione, signed the sheet with absolutely no hesitation.

Harry nodded approvingly after everyone else had returned to their chairs. "Brilliant, and for today's lesson we are going to go over the theory of the Patronus charm, and then we'll work on casting. Dementors will be the most likely source of attack for non-specific

terror type attacks, because they are nearly indestructible, and therefore a better option than using Death Eaters, which can be killed just as easily as anyone else in this room."

Ron raised his hand. "How can we expect to perform the charm in the presence of dementors if we can't practice on one?"

Harry grinned. "Good question Ron. Some of you might know that the defense instructor from two years ago, Professor Lupin, taught me the Patronus charm due to my adverse reaction to dementors. In the private lessons, he used a boggart that took advantage of the fact that my greatest fear was a Dementor."

Parvati nodded. "That's right, you froze up in class when it appeared and Professor Lupin stepped between you and the boggart."

Harry nodded. "I've since done some research and I've found a way to charm a boggart into the form of a Dementor for instructional purposes. We'll be dealing with a charmed boggart when I feel everyone in the group has made enough progress. I tend to think that we as a group will only be as good as our weakest link, so if you can help someone else out with a spell they are having difficulty with it will make everything go much more smoothly."

Seeing no questions he instructed, "The Patronus charm is a manifestation of your magic through the mental application of a particularly positive memory or emotion. You need to find a memory of the happiest time in your life. It has to be something with real substance, nothing like your first broom ride or acing an exam. Take your time and pick a proper memory."

Seeing a few blank looks Harry explained, "The memory I use isn't a memory of an event, but just the memory of my parents and how it would feel to know they loved me. You can not overlook the emotional aspect of this spell. When you're done, just go over to the corner there and wait, we'll be moving on to more theory and then we'll see how your first attempts will go."

As Harry watched everyone in the room screw their faces up in concentration thinking up a memory of the appropriate quality

Hermione leaned over. "It almost seems to be a shame that we could only get 15 people for the group."

Harry sighed. "I know, but I'd rather teach a few people properly, as opposed to teaching a lot of people poorly."

Hermione nodded as she whispered, "That's fair enough Harry, but what if we added say five more people, and we can only add people who contact us first."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know how word could get out at this point, the secrecy oath guarantees that."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You know how hard it is to keep a secret at Hogwarts. I bet you'll be surprised how many people already know something about it."

Harry watched as Neville walked over the corner joining about ten others, before he spoke out of the side of his mouth. "Five more people Hermione, and only if they come to you and they are deemed trustworthy." Hermione nodded, pleased with Harry's compromise, and she watched as the remainder of the group lined up by the back corner as had been instructed.

Harry clapped his hands together and concentrated on the room changing to a more practical environment, which would be better suited for actual spell work. The room shifted, and those in the room gaped as it appeared his clap had prompted the change. Harry was in no hurry to correct their assumptions, for obvious reasons.

"Alright guys, the incantation for the spell is Expecto Patronum. Wand movements aren't important for this particular spell, just remember that happy memory and say the incantation, forcing your magic out."

The initial attempts were on the whole about what he expected, with Neville surprisingly being the closest to getting a decent amount of mist to come out of his wand. Harry really couldn't fault Ron and Ginny for their lackluster efforts. Finding a happy memory with their father near death would be close to thinking of something happy with a Dementor a few feet away.

After everyone had made a second effort with no appreciable difference, Harry summoned a box of Honeydukes chocolate. "Ok guys, I think we'll call it a day there. Unlike most of the spells I'll be teaching you, the Patronus charm requires a lot of magical energy, and it takes time to acclimate to the strain multiple castings of the spell will take. Take a piece of Honeyduke's chocolate, it will help with that drained feeling you have. Next meeting we will do some more of the patronus charm, and I will start showing you some of the best shields to use when confronted. Good job today."

As everyone sorted out of the room slowly Harry exhaled a deep breath he wasn't aware he had been holding. Hermione and Ron had stayed behind and watched as the room slowly shifted back to a non-descript room, with absolutely no signs indicating it had been a meeting place for an unsanctioned study group.

Harry hadn't once glanced in his best friends' direction but he still knew that they were there. "So how did I do?"

Ron grinned. "Well even if we only covered a little bit, it was loads better than Umbridge."

Hermione wryly replied, "If that isn't a backhanded compliment, I don't know what is."

Harry chuckled as he looped an arm around Hermione's shoulder and steered her towards the exit. "Trust me mate, I've only just begun."

.....

Life at Hogwarts finally began to settle into a comfortable routine by the third week in October. Harry and Hermione were both near the top of their classes and their independent studies, Harry's being in Arithmancy and Hermione's being academia in general, continued the course although progress was hampered by Mr. Weasley's continued deterioration.

The infection had spread to his heart and by now only magic was keeping the cheerful man amongst the living. Ron and Ginny had

already started to move into grieving, and the twins had even been a far sight from their usual mischievous selves. Surprisingly, Molly had made the unexpected move of requesting that her children not visit, in hopes of them remembering the once vibrant man Arthur was, instead as the pale imitation he was now.

All of this was swirling around the school as the Gryffindors were sitting at their table in the Great Hall the week before Halloween. An owl flew into the room and landed on the table by Professor McGonagall's seat. Carefully she broke the seal on the letter and visibly slumped, a rare and rather unsettling sight none of her students would ever expect to see from the normally implacable professor.

Ron, Ginny, and the twins were well aware of the contents of the letter and they wordlessly all walked to the staff table, following their head of house with nary a word. Hermione's face crumpled with realization and Harry ruthlessly clamped down on emotions with his Occlumency to prevent himself from doing the same.

While Arthur Weasley was by reputation a blood traitor, there weren't any students unaware of Harry and Hermione's close ties to the Weasley family. Out of respect the Great Hall remained quiet to honor the silent grieving taking place by the numb students, who otherwise would have left to grieve in private.

As he sat there in the Great Hall stroking Hermione's hair as she sobbed into his chest the familiar pangs of guilt surfaced. Silently he wished the Weasleys had never met him. Arthur would be alive and any number of calamities never would have befallen their family. Of course, Harry knew this was his irrational side speaking, seeking an outlet aside from the thick grief he was feeling at the moment.

Two tears still managed to escape his eyes, even with his Occlumency kicked into full gear, but he decided that would be all the more tears he would shed for Arthur. Not because he wouldn't miss the man, but because he wanted to honor the kindly man's life by living it to the fullest and not losing time and energy to regret.

Without another word Harry softly called out, "Dobby."

The little elf popped right next to Harry and Hermione and softly asked, "What is Harry Potter sir needing Dobby for?"

Harry sighed. "Could you take my and Hermione's bags back to our rooms please?"

Dobby nodded and snapped his fingers, the book bags vanishing, followed a moment later by a quiet pop for the little elf. Harry snapped his eyes to Dumbledore at the head of the staff table, and the old wizard merely nodded, seemingly accepting and agreeing with whatever Harry had planned. Harry gently pulled Hermione into his arms as he stood, her arms still locked around his neck as her quiet sobs filled his heart with pain. Cradling her like a young child he wordlessly walked out of the Great Hall, headed towards the Room of Requirement for some time to peacefully grieve before dealing with all of the unpleasant necessities the death of a loved one entailed.

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The funeral for Arthur Weasley had been a very private affair, and was just another reason why October was definitely Harry's least favorite month of the year. While Harry had held solid to his vow to shed no more tears over Arthur's death, he was the proverbial rock that Hermione, Ginny, and Ron needed in the following days. Halloween passed with no attacks whatsoever, the only real news being the impending nomination process for the vacant position of Minister of Magic.

Due to the constraints of running the Ministry of Magic, Dumbledore had been missing from Hogwarts for the second time this term for an extended period of time. Professor McGonagall had simply filled in as deputy, but it was rather apparent she wanted the wizened wizard back soon as well.

Hermione had bounced back into her schoolwork following her very public breakdown of sorts, one which no one criticized her for in any way. Granted, having Harry Potter as a boyfriend acted as a deterrent, and for those interested in such things their betrothal sealed the deal.

Therefore it came as a surprise to Harry at the end of his Monday classes in the first full week after Halloween when Fawkes flashed into the air beside him, landing gently on his shoulder, much like a parrot in the shoulder of a pirate.

Umbridge gawked at the spectacle for a moment and opened her mouth to say something before thinking better of it. While it was still very light on the practical aspect of Defense, most likely as much due to Umbridge's incompetence as anything else, the class had improved markedly since Fudge's ouster as the toad woman actually made an effort at teaching occasionally.

Harry broke the seal on the rolled up parchment and read the brief note from Dumbledore.

Harry,

Please come to my office following dinner, I have some very important things that must be discussed

AP.W.B.D

P.S. I particularly enjoy cockroach clusters.

.....

After a quick lunch Harry found himself outside of the gargoyles guarding the headmaster's office. More amused than anything else, Harry said the password despite the fact that he never needed to say it. As he spiraled upwards on the staircase, Harry wondered what Dumbledore could need to discuss. Voldemort had been mostly quiet since the attacks in September, apparently happy to work in the shadows, as the dark wizard was wont to.

Dumbledore was sitting in his chair in a discussion with someone; to Harry's surprise Bill Weasley was the other party and he was sitting in Harry's usual chair. Shrugging his shoulders Harry wordlessly took the opposite seat and waited to be acknowledged by either wizard.

Dumbledore broke off his conversation with Bill. "Thank you for coming Harry. We have a few issues that must be dealt with tonight, and the first involves William here."

Bill reached over and clapped Harry's shoulder. "Thanks for being such a good friend to our family Harry. I never had a chance to tell you that at the funeral."

Harry smiled wanly. "We all have our own roles to play Bill. I'm just glad I could help."

Bill nodded and Dumbledore jumped back into the conversation. "It is along these lines that I brought you both here tonight. The Potter and Weasley families are well respected amongst all members of society, even if there are individual differences between some."

Harry was trying to piece together the significance of Dumbledore's words, but he was coming up blank. "I've been doing some research about the Wizengamot and my family's history, but I don't see where you are going with this Professor."

Dumbledore nodded. "Understandable Harry. Your research into your family history is a credit to your family's name." Harry nodded as Dumbledore continued, "Your thoughts are not far off the mark Harry, and it is with the respect and regard your families are held that I make this request."

Bill looked only slightly less confused than Harry. "Professor, my family doesn't have nearly the political clout that Harry's family has held over the years."

Dumbledore slowly raised his hand to forestall any more comments. "Political clout and respect are two entirely different things. The fact that Harry's family has had both is not a matter we need worry about today. You see, gentlemen, you are both in the rare position of being the heads of your families at a very young age; a sad but inevitable fact that occurs in times of war. Bill, you and Harry are both thought of as leaders of your generation in the near future. Harry's role will be as a leader of the war effort and eventually as the leader of young Wizengamot members, which Mr. Longbottom will join as well as a

few others in Harry's year. A higher concentration of future Wizengamot members I have never seen in all of my years."

Harry's ears were pink with the earnest praise he had just received as Dumbledore continued, "Bill, you are the first British born curse breaker in nearly seventy years and your dealings with the goblin nation have been mentioned with high praise amongst certain social circles. It is with this in mind that I propose you publicly align your houses and declare a blood feud against the Lestrangle and Riddle families."

Bill looked a little pale but Harry was finally starting to get his feet underneath him in the conversation due to his readings. "A blood feud wouldn't really accomplish anything of value Professor Dumbledore, at least none that I can see."

Professor Dumbledore nodded appraisingly. "You are growing more perceptive Harry, but on that assertion I must disagree. While it is true there is no physical value to making such a statement, there is a certain measure of political value which can be obtained. Namely, such an announcement will bring forth questions of the Riddle family's past and will weaken Tom's political support when it is discovered he is only a half blood himself. Additionally, by doing this Harry you will show some of the older pureblood families that have remained neutral that you are not shunning their values."

Harry nodded slowly and Bill looked a little less white, although he did look a little out of his depth all the same. Dumbledore smiled benignly at their seeming agreement. "It is an announcement that we shall save until right before the holidays, but I wished to seek your acceptance of the measures."

Harry shrugged. "I can't see any reason not to at the moment, but I will think it over for a bit before giving my final approval." Dumbledore nodded approvingly before he turned to gauge Bill's reaction.

"Professor, I admit I am at a bit of a loss here. Not because I am against what you are proposing, but because I am ill prepared to understand politics. My father worked half of his life to have any political standing, so it isn't something I grew up accustomed to. Give

me a couple of weeks to read up on the political climate, but I doubt I'll have any problem with the proposal." Bill finished and ran a weary hand over his face.

Dumbledore stood from his seat and walked over to Bill, helping him out of his seat as well. "Understandable William, you are aware of how to contact me when you have made a final decision. For now, Harry and I have other matters to discuss." Bill allowed the older wizard to lead him over to the fireplace before he muttered his destination and disappeared in a flash of emerald fire.

Dumbledore returned to his seat and smiled as Fawkes trilled a note, which seemed to be a form of phoenix encouragement. Dumbledore turned to Harry and simply said, "You know more about Lord Voldemort than most Harry. So, it behooves me to teach you something different. I am going to show you who Tom Riddle is."

A/N: Well, next chapter we pick up from here and we get into the selection of the next minister of magic a bit. Sorry about the long wait, but I will start working on chapter 17 this week and hopefully have it sent of to my beta by the weekend.

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"So Luna Lovegood came up to me and asked about it yesterday. She makes the fifth and final person we'll add to the study group, and seeing as how she is portrayed as the biggest loon in the school I figured she won't be a security risk even if she did try to betray us." Hermione conversationally brought up to Harry on an early November evening in the Gryffindor common room.

Harry shrugged as he took the time to dip his quill into the inkpot. He had settled into the acceptance stage of grief for Mr. Weasley's death quickly. It had been hard finding some sort of inner peace with all of the death and mayhem swirling around Britain. Voldemort had remained mostly quiet, the dark lord seemingly being content with sending groupings of dementors around the British countryside to pick off small muggle villages. It was enough to keep the Ministry too occupied with obliuations and cover-ups to make any sort of an offensive movement while the top position in the government remained unfilled.

Harry and Hermione had developed a certain comfort level over the first couple of months of the term that allowed one of them to listen while the other rambled, with the ability to avoid snide remarks and simply concentrate and reason their way through various situations. Harry furrowed his brow as he finished the conclusion on his essay for Herbology due next week. "I figure I am going to bestow the wisdom of Mad-Eye on them at next week's meeting," he finally responded. "See how many of them are taking this seriously, and I'll have the chance to get some practice in."

Hermione arched her right eyebrow and was prepared to ask a probing question when Harry nodded his head in the general direction of Ron and Lavender, the couple in a quiet but heated quarrel of some severity. Of course, when arguments mixed with Weasleys they didn't remain quiet for too long.

"Stop ignoring me Ronnie. I am your girlfriend for Merlin's sake. You can at least act like you care." Lavender's voice picked up in volume sufficiently to capture everyone in the common room's attention.

Ron let loose an explosive breath, but he didn't look as angry as he looked more resigned and just plain tired. His patience with Lavender was steadily decreasing as the day to day incessant squabbles were taking their toll on Ron, in addition to all of the other horrors of the term just about two and a half months in.

"What, are you that big of a coward that you don't have anything to say?" Lavender taunted the redhead, feeling emboldened by the audience.

Ron's eyes narrowed and with a maturity few knew he possessed he quietly replied, "Lav, seems to me you've said enough for the both of us. I'm sorry I'm not the same bloke I was when we first started dating, but I can't be that guy any more and I think the best way I can apologize is by letting you go to be with someone else."

Lavender's taunt suddenly seemed ill fitting when placed against the backdrop of Ron's mature response and all of the anger she might have had with her ginger haired ex-boyfriend vanished with it. Sniffing once, she nodded as tears began to pool in her eyes. Parvati walked up and took her friends hand, shooting Ron a look that was more reproachful than angry as they ascended the stairs to the fifth year girls' dorm.

Ron sighed heavily as he collected his books and parchments from the essay he had been slowly working on, before he glanced over to Harry and Hermione where he noticed an empty seat begging to be filled.

Ron plopped down in the Victorian era chair with a grunt before he lightly said, "Guess I'm single again."

Harry chuckled as Hermione rolled her eyes. "Mate, I'd like to say I didn't see it coming. But, that'd be lying and you know how I am about that." Harry punctuated this statement with a wink, and strangely enough a grunt as Hermione's elbow found his ribs.

Hermione took a more diplomatic approach. "Despite Harry's complete lack of tact, I have to agree with the sentiment. You outgrew

Lavender, and I think breaking up was the best thing you could have done. I mean that for the both of you."

Ron grinned. "Yeah, well it's hard not to grow up with everything else going on." Left unspoken was his father's death, because that wound was still fresh and would remain so in the near future and to a lesser extent for the rest of his life.

Harry quickly diverted the topic before all of them ended up depressed by that line of thought. "Well, seeing as how I convinced Hermione to hold off until you were up to it, how about we go to the Room of Requirement and I show the two of you what Dumbledore told me in that meeting a week and a half ago?" Hermione glanced at her extra credit assignment for Arithmancy before she shrugged, while Ron looked relieved to have a valid excuse to skive off of homework for the rest of the night.

After doing the requisite pacing the door to the room appeared, and the three grinned at the wonderful things magic could do. The room was set up as a replica of the Gryffindor common room, but with all of the privacy that the real version did not afford them. Harry furrowed his brow as a familiar looking stone basin appeared next to the couch and the three walked over and took a seat next to it. The intricately carved runes on the rim of the basin were what caught Hermione's attention and she was mumbling as she spot translated what the combination was.

Ron was more interested in the basin itself because it tickled at his brain before it popped into his head. "Blimey, that's a pensieve."

Harry nodded, "Well, it will work like a pensieve at any rate. Now this will be a little dodgy, because you two will be in my memory of watching a memory. But, in theory you shouldn't have any problem seeing everything. I won't be going in with you, because frankly I've seen it already, and I could use a spot of exercise if the room will be kind enough to provide."

With a flick of his wrist Harry's familiar wand slid into his palm and he raised the holly wand to his temple. A silvery, ethereal strand was slowly pulled out and quickly deposited into the pensieve before

Harry went back to his temple and withdrew a second memory. Swishing his wand in the pensieve Harry said, "Ok, I suggest going into the memory, because you experience everything that way, as opposed to just watching. To experience the memory just stick your heads into the pensieve. I've set it up so you'll watch both memories before being pulled out."

Ron and Hermione shared a look. In all of their adventures it had never been just the two of them alone doing something, but as was the case with most aspects of growing up, it was going to be a novel experience.

Harry waited until his two best friends dipped their heads into the basin and watched them disappear before he walked to a far corner which already held a machine which he recognized from something he himself had placed into storage for the Dursleys a few years earlier. It had been a present for Vernon from some of his friends at work, something about keeping insurance premiums down if Harry's memory served him. Now it would serve his own exercise needs and he stepped on to the first and probably last NordicTrack housed inside the castle.

Ron and Hermione glanced around, and fortunately they were in the original memory, but they did join the memory of Harry inside of it. Their friend was watching with rapt attention as a much younger Dumbledore apparated to a small alley, somewhere in a rundown part of London.

Hermione glanced over to Ron who was poking the people in the memory to see if he could illicit a response. Sighing heavily she realized that while Ron had indeed been growing up as of late, he was still ultimately Ron.

"Ron, come over here and pay attention. Harry asked us to watch the memory and see what we can."

Ron grumbled but dutifully did as he was told just in time for Dumbledore to enter a rather run down building with a crooked sign that simply said, "Orphanage."

They followed Dumbledore into the building before he could shut the door behind him, not wanting to take the chance of being left behind in the memory.

"Hello Miss, I am here to visit young Mr. Riddle. I am a Professor at a prestigious boarding school that the young man's lineage provides he may attend. Would it be possible to speak to him in private?" Dumbledore spoke to a short matronly woman, no doubt one of the principals of the orphanage.

"Riddle you say? Well he is a tricky young man. Might I ask how his parents could provide for boarding school, and yet could not provide an alternative living arrangement for him?"

Dumbledore smoothly answered the sharp-minded woman, "His parents both died shortly following his birth, and sadly were the last of their lines. The boarding school is the one legacy his parents left him, and it behooves me to track down such rare individuals to offer them admission to the school."

The woman nodded as she simply said, "Follow me, I'll lead you to a private meeting room we use for prospective students."

Ron and Hermione followed the memory version of Dumbledore, Harry right alongside them from his own remembrances.

Ron furrowed his brow before he veered away. "You stay here with Dumbledore I'm going to follow this woman to find Riddle."

Hermione nodded as Ron took off at a run to catch up to the matron before she took a moment to look at Dumbledore intently. The man appeared almost impatient as he waited in the room, an expression she never thought she'd see on the placid wizard's face.

She remembered from her forays into determining who Tom Riddle was, that he was Head Boy during the 1944-45 school year. Therefore this was 1938 and Grindelwald's threat was just beginning to filter through Europe.

Dumbledore was mumbling something to himself when the door to the meeting room swung open to reveal a young dark haired boy and Ron following him.

Ron's expression was one of deep concern as he looked to Hermione.

"Hello Tom, I'm Professor Dumbledore. I have come here to ask if you would you like to talk for a few minutes about going to a boarding school in Scotland." Dumbledore said kindly, although he wasn't making eye contact with young Riddle.

Tom Riddle was a normal looking 11 year-old-boy with dark fathomless eyes, and if one looked close enough he had a certain air of malice about him.

"Why would I want to go to Scotland for school?" Tom nearly sneered.

This finally caught Dumbledore's full attention as he gazed down at the boy before he flicked his wand and what must have been a silent confundus charm took hold to prevent any unwanted visitors as he said, "Have you ever wondered why strange things happen around you Tom?"

Riddle's eyes became calculating, which was rather disconcerting on one so young, "You mean my powers, don't you?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed, but if you are aware enough of your magic to call them powers, then you must already have some control over them." It was stated as a fact.

"Everyone always called me worthless before I figured out how they work, but they don't call me names anymore." Tom stated proudly.

Dumbledore locked eyes with Riddle for a long moment before he simply said, "You are very powerful already Tom. Most witches and wizards need a wand for what you have been doing. With a wand you will become even more powerful, but you will also learn how to responsibly use that power. Would you like that Tom?"

Hermione and Ron shivered in tandem at the malicious glee lurking behind Riddle's eyes, it was strange to see evil incarnate in such a small package.

"I'd like that, Professor Dumbledore."

As Dumbledore reached into his robes to hand the boy his acceptance letter to Hogwarts the memory began to swirl as it shifted to the second of the memories Harry provided.

This time they were in a familiar looking room, but instead of there being the headmaster's desk and Fawkes' perch there was a large conference table and what appeared to be a meeting of some sort. Hermione glanced around, somewhat surprised to see Flitwick, Dumbledore, and what appeared to be a living Binns sitting at the table.

A bald and feeble looking wizard stood from the head of the table and spoke. "I'm happy to see all of you could make it to the end of the term staff meeting this year. Deputy Headmaster Dumbledore, if you would be so kind as to give us your report on the end of the term exams."

"Of course Headmaster Dippet." Dumbledore cleared his throat. "The fifth and seventh years successfully completed their OWL and NEWT examinations and according to Madam Marchbanks, the initial predictions are a slightly above average year."

Dippet nodded as he motioned for the next professor to give a report and an elderly witch stood, "The Defense classes have focused more on practical work this year on the off chance that Grindelwald forces make inroads here in Britain. Minerva Burns turned in a rather impressive paper on the use of transfiguration in defense, especially for a second year student. It's also worth noting that the Slytherin students continue to excel in the dueling club. In fact, one first year managed to beat a few third year Hufflepuffs. Tom Riddle I believe his name was."

Dumbledore listened with interest, but it didn't appear as if the announcement was any real news.

Flitwick was next and the squeaky but cheerful tiny professor looked much different with a head full of dark hair and facial hair that looked more fitting for a lady killer of some sort. "This year was very successful and without incident save for the first day of classes, an incident I'm sure you all heard about. Young Mr. Riddle's rage at failing to master the levitation charm, it was...disconcerting to say the least, but since the incident then he has been a model student. It appeared to be a mere case of being homesick in combination with his failure at the charm."

The rest of the teachers nodded their agreement; there was typically one first year student every year that had some sort of a mini-tantrum while getting acclimated. In fact the only professor that didn't appear to be in agreement was Dumbledore, who was looking rather worn down, and the news about Riddle certainly didn't appear to be helping.

Hermione and Ron shared a look at how similar circumstances with the same charm led to the formation of their friendship; before the memory began to swirl once again, depositing the pair back into the Room of Requirement after watching the telling pair of memories.

Harry was in the far corner of the room, on what appeared to be a pull up bar, but instead of being attached to the bar by his hands his ankles were somehow cuffed to the bar as he did some crunches. Hermione sauntered over to her boyfriend, acting as coy as she was physically capable of being.

Harry grunted as he powered through two more crunches before he caught a hint of movement out of the corner of his eye. Summoning up a little more energy he bent at the waist and unbuckled his ankles before he gripped the bar to prevent a nice fall on his bum.

Reaching over, Harry grabbed a towel and wiped his face down before he turned to Hermione. "So, pretty creepy for an 11-year-old wasn't he?"

Hermione cracked a grin at Harry's levity before she stated, "Dumbledore saw it coming a mile away, didn't he?"

Harry waved Ron over before he said, "I get the feeling that by the end of these little memory meetings, I'll know things about Riddle that no one else in the world would ever guess. But, beyond that I think Dumbledore has one more little Voldemort bomb to drop on me. It's the only reason he would want me to see these memories, I'm sure of that."

Ron nodded thoughtfully before he asked, "So was that all Dumbledore wanted?"

Harry chuckled and shook his head, "Oh no, but let's take a seat before I go into politics."

As they sat down, Harry explained Dumbledore's request to fully and officially ally the house of Potter with the house of Weasley. The repercussions of declaring a blood feud and Bill's reaction to them had Ron rolling on the floor, thinking of his composed and ultra cool big brother turning green at the prospect.

It would be fair to say that the next few hours were much more fun than the three had experienced since the beginning of the term. With a Hogsmeade weekend coming up, things were beginning to look up for the first time in awhile and they could shirk the weight of the deaths and war and act their age for once.

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It was an odd November day in the hills and land surrounding Hogwarts and Hogsmeade village. After several weeks of cold weather, an unseasonably warm stretch of weather descended upon the highlands. With warm unseasonable weather came the inevitable fog, which served as a very strange backdrop as students boarded the carriages that would take them into town.

Auror patrols nearly blanketed the entire village as the Ministry, namely the newly-recovered Amelia Bones, was taking no chances of a Voldemort led attack on Hogsmeade.

Harry and Hermione were riding in a carriage with Ron and Ginny, both younger Weasley siblings single after Ron's break up with

Lavender. Ginny was reading a copy of the morning Prophet as she said, "Can you believe Voldemort? Now he's focusing on muggle villages with dementors. What does he expect to gain by attacking muggles? I mean, I doubt he wants the wizarding world exposed any more than we do."

Hermione glanced up towards Ginny as Harry buried his face in her neck, "I would think it was obvious Ginny. Voldemort is keeping the Ministry busy by slaughtering muggles, so they can't focus on finding him or at least interfere with his plans."

Ginny frowned thoughtfully as Ron still couldn't completely suppress the shudder at the brazen stating of Voldemort's name.

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In the carriage behind the Gryffindor quartet, a decidedly different quartet rumbled down towards the village.

Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass, Millicent Bulstrode, and Tracey Davis were quietly sitting in their carriage doing what any good Slytherin does; gather the measure of both their allies and their enemies. Blaise and Daphne, being members of Potter's study group felt they owed it to the raven haired wizard to at least keep an eye on potential threats from within their house.

Surprisingly enough, Malfoy wasn't making a lot of noise about either Potter or the dark lord this year. However, one Slytherin had made some quiet threats about Potter associating with mudblood rabble, especially after one particular Slytherin had been humiliated in the Great Hall.

Tracey had been mostly quiet since her public humiliation, but she could be seen 'Potter watching' routinely, and a notebook full of observations had led her to a change in tactics. She was wearing a decidedly unrevealing outfit, and she actually had on a pair of reading glasses more for show than actual use.

Daphne had shared a room with Tracey for four and a half years, and it was rather obvious the auburn haired witch was up to something.

Whether she had given up on Harry and was now pursuing a Ravenclaw, or if she was simply taking a different tack Daphne knew she was going to have to keep her eyes open during the trip today.

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The carriages came to a stop just outside of the village and the four Gryffindors piled out, Harry helping Hermione and Ginny out while Ron concerned himself with other matters.

Harry grinned at Hermione as she threaded her fingers through his. "So, where do you want to go first?"

Hermione feigned deep thought. "Bookstore?"

Harry furrowed his brow thinking about their last trip to said bookstore and he remembered several stolen snogs deep in the back corner of the store. "Ok, but you have to act as tour guide again."

Hermione grinned slyly as Ron and Ginny shared a look, before the male Weasley said, "Right...well Gin and I will be at Zonko's if you want to find us. We'll be sure to save a booth at the Three Broomsticks by three so be there by then."

As the group split up, Tracey Davis watched silently before she took down a note into the small notebook she was now carrying around. Daphne sighed before she linked arms with Blaise and tugged on him as they followed their wayward housemate.

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In the Ministry of Magic, the formal nomination process was taking place in front of the assembled Wizengamot.

Dumbledore stood in his role as Chief Warlock and formally intoned, "Who here stands for nomination for Minister of Magic?"

Several people stood and nominees were slowly compiled; Percy as scribe was feverishly writing everything down as the eligible candidates list ended at 4.

Percy handed Dumbledore the list and the old wizard scanned the list before he again intoned, "Final candidates for the position of Minister of Magic include: Madam Amelia Bones, Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour, Mr. Barty Crouch Sr., and Mr. Walden McNair. Candidates are aware of the proper code of conduct they must adhere to, and voting will take place two weeks from now. Voting will continue until a clear majority for one candidate has been reached. Good day to you all."

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"Harry, have you found any books you want?" Hermione asked as her head appeared through a gap in the bookshelves.

Harry grinned sheepishly as he browsed a book on the history of Puddlemere United. "Erm yeah, I have one book I planned on buying."

Hermione gazed at the book in his hands and was about to comment on his decidedly un-academic pursuits, before she stopped herself. Harry had been so serious for so long the past year, taking some time to enjoy the fruits of his labor was perfectly acceptable. If someone had asked her during her third year if she ever thought Harry could be as focused as he had been for over a year, she would have scoffed at them. Her reaction would have simply been a product of experience, not a matter of denigrating Harry's relative talents. She had always known he had talent; but over the last year and a half she had been pleased that he finally began to put in the work to realize his talent.

"Recreational reading this time Harry?" Hermione asked in a teasing voice.

Harry chuckled as he relieved her of the five books she had found. "We all have our vices Hermione. I have Quidditch, and you have extremely heavy books."

Hermione laughed as they went to the front counter and split the cost on the assembled books before the shopkeeper shrunk the books for them to ease their load.

As Harry held the door for Hermione he opened his mouth to ask where she wanted to go next, when a shriek startled everyone in the near vicinity. An auburn haired girl was being towered over, and Crabbe held her arms as Goyle rifled through her purse.

With the grace of a pair of large cats Harry and Hermione covered the distance to the apparent attack. Harry's wand slid into his hand and went to Crabbe's temple almost absently. The boorish Slytherin squeaked like a mouse as he released the girl's arms while Hermione simply cuffed Goyle in the ear with an open palm, temporarily stunning him.

In a bemused tone Harry simply asked, "What are you two idiots doing?"

In a reply filled with more grunts than words, Harry was able to ascertain that said witch had an item of interest in her purse.

Hermione helped the frazzled girl gather her wits and her belongings before she even realized it was Tracey Davis. "Tracey, why would these oafs attack you? I thought you were all pretty chummy earlier in the year."

Tracey sniffed as she straightened her glasses. "I imagine that had more to do with my cleavage, than my actual feelings."

Harry blinked as he tried to connect the two completely different girls in his mind before he asked, "What's with the split personalities?"

Tracey sighed before she glanced around at the gathering crowd. "If we can go somewhere a little more private, I'll do my best to explain."

Harry and Hermione shared a brief look before she answered for them. "Fine, let's go into Dervish and Banges."

As the three walked into the adjoining shop Daphne narrowed her eyes before she sighed and started dragging Blaise towards Madam Puddifoot's. She had done all she could, the next move was entirely up to Harry and Hermione.

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Deep in the back corner of Dervish and Banges Harry made a show up pulling his wand to set a privacy charm and Confundus charm around the perimeter of the area.

"Ok, let's hear this explanation for why one day you are nearly flashing your bits directly in my face in the Great Hall, and another you are the very example of propriety as a pair of your house mates mug you in public." Harry asked in the same skeptical tone he had used earlier.

Hermione merely nodded her agreement to Harry's sentiment as Tracey sighed. "Seeing as how both of you were muggle raised, I'm not surprised you aren't exactly familiar with it. Let me ask you a question, have you read about the importance of political marriages within our culture?"

Hermione replied, "I know that political marriages are only important to a few pureblood families, willing to marry their own cousins to keep their blood 'pure'."

Tracey sighed. "Not completely inaccurate, but I think you might downplay just how many purebloods there are. For your information, my father is a muggleborn and while he did take my mother's name for political reasons there was no arranged marriage."

Harry's eyes bugged out. "Your father took your mother's last name?"

Tracey nodded. "Like I said, politics are big for purebloods. The only way my family could retain their credibility is by my father changing his name upon marriage. Do you have any idea just how much prestige I would gain for my family by joining with the Potter line?"

Harry wryly replied, "I'm sure you would gain a fair bit, considering I know the Davis family doesn't have a seat on the Wizengamot, while the Potter family has a hereditary seat."

Tracey nodded. "Exactly, and guess who my mother suggested I see if I'm compatible with?"

Hermione arched her eyebrow. "I'm sure you were forced."

Tracey shrugged. "I'll admit that I've had a crush on Po-Harry for years. Not that there was much more to it than your celebrity and those green eyes."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, mussing it even more than usual before he said, "Do you have any idea how I grew up?"

Tracey furrowed her brow. "Supposedly you were raised by some muggle relatives."

Harry nodded and opened his mouth to speak when the entire building rattled ominously before Hermione shot him a glance and he canceled the privacy spells. Another thump in the distance was felt as the ground shook, "Harry..."

Harry nodded before he turned to Tracey, "As thrilling as this chat has been, Hermione and I have to go." Tracey opened her mouth to reply, but the pair of Gryffindors had already shot down the aisle and towards the door. She closed her mouth with an audible click before she smirked and pulled her trusty notebook out. With a couple of jotted lines she nodded to herself; things were coming along just fine.

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Harry and Hermione sprinted out of the door and were horrified at the sight before them. Aurors were throwing spells at a group of four giants to little effect as the monsters were hurling boulders into Madam Puddifoot's. While the auror squads had undergone training on how to properly engage a Giant, it was lost in the madness of the moment.

The structure of the romantic rendezvous already appeared to be half demolished as two more boulders were lobbed into the building. Harry frowned as he watched the spell resistant skin of the giants

absorb spell after spell before he nodded to himself and pulled Hermione into a nearby alleyway.

"Harry, what are you doing? We have to help those people!" Hermione protested wildly.

Harry sighed before he silenced his bushy haired girlfriend with an intense look. "I am going to go help them, because I have the means to do so."

Hermione blinked, "What?"

Harry didn't reply verbally, rather his actions spoke for him as he seamlessly transformed into the twilight panther. Green eyes met brown ones and communicated a thousand words before the large cat vanished into a shadow.

Hermione took a deep breath before she walked back out of the alley to keep up appearances as the means to distract her if nothing else.

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Harry traveled through the shadows, silently thankful that it was a sunny day that afforded him the option of getting very close to the giants. Deciding to test if he truly was the most feared magical predator in the southern hemisphere he appeared in the shadow directly behind the furthest back giant. Slowly his deadly claws unsheathed and with a quick swipe with both paws he broke the skin of the giant and severed the brute's Achilles tendon.

As the giant unleashed a pain filled scream Harry shadow traveled to the front-most giant, which fortunately turned at the sound of his wounded comrade. Nearby Aurors would later swear that they saw a trained Nundu take a massive chunk out of the lead giant's calf before it disappeared into thin air.

A moment later the two wounded giants along with the two unharmed ones made a hasty retreat into the forbidden forest, their plans falling apart at the seams. Foiled by some strange cat creature, they would have bad news to report back to their liaison from Voldemort.

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Harry shadow traveled back to the same alley and made sure the coast was clear before he transformed back and did a quick cleaning charm to remove the Giant's blood from his hands and clothes. Quietly he rejoined Hermione and whispered into her ear, "Not bad eh?"

Hermione cracked a quick grin before she tugged on Harry's hand as they sprinted towards the shattered remains of Madam Puddifoot's. Several other students and villagers were following Harry and Hermione's lead as they approached the Aurors, who were levitating debris out of the way to check for survivors. They were surprised as Cedric and Cho ran up to them. "We have to get any survivors to the hospital quickly."

Harry simply replied, "That was the plan, yes."

The four quickly entered the remains of the building as the last of the debris was cleared. The first sight greeting them would be nightmare fodder for a several weeks, as the decapitated trunk of Madam Puddifoot was splattered near the front counter.

Hermione swallowed the bile that threatened to come out and she broke away from Harry searching for survivors as she screamed, "Yell if you can hear us, we will try to get you out."

A familiar pair of voices rang through the chilling silence. "Over here!"

Hermione scrambled over to the corner of the room and stifled a gasp at the sight of Daphne Greengrass with an obvious compound fracture, the bone jutting out of her leg, and Blaise Zabini looking to be well on his way to a state of shock with one of the giant's boulders rolled up on his arm to his shoulder. Hermione sighed and with a flick of her wand the boulder was levitated up and out of the building through a gaping hole in the ceiling. Blaise groaned as he began to sweat, his arm was clearly mangled, but with any luck could be saved. Hermione waved a couple of newly arrived healers over as she continued to search for survivors.

Harry hadn't been as fortunate, he first came upon a dying Marietta Edgecombe, a jagged piece of wood having impaled her chest, sticking her to the wall like a giant tack on particle board. She reached out with her arm to Harry, and he grasped her hand and said, "Hang on Marietta, help is on the way."

Her eyes were glazing over at this point as she took her fitful last gasps of air, she seemed to take some small measure of comfort in her last moments alive thanks to Harry's presence. She managed to squeeze his hand once more before her eyes became dull and she died one of many needless deaths in the war ahead.

Hermione finally found Harry nearly ten minutes later, which in all honesty felt closer to an hour as many more injured, and a few more dead were uncovered. In a dead voice Harry acknowledged her presence, "Hey."

Hermione felt rather close to breaking down. She had retched for nearly a minute straight upon finding a pair of fourth year Hufflepuff's ruined bodies. Their hands were still firmly entwined even in death, and Hermione couldn't help but picture herself and Harry found in a similar state.

After they were both herded out of the building, a nearby Auror handed them each a blanket and small block of chocolate. The majority of the students had been escorted back to the castle as the dead and wounded were slowly extricated from the building.

Hermione finally found her voice as they were led to the Thestral drawn carriages leading back to the castle. "It could have been us."

Harry understood the sentiment all too well as he gathered his shivering girlfriend in his arms and simply said, "Yep."

Somewhere in the dark recesses of his mind he would acknowledge the horrors of the afternoon, but he couldn't afford such a luxury in his day to day existence. Instead, the Boy-Who-Lived simply reaffirmed the oath he had made to himself a hundred times over - Voldemort would die and his followers would rot in Azkaban.

A/N: Well, a bit of gore and action for you all at the end of the chapter this time. I'd say there will be fall out in the next chapter, but you'll soon see that everyone is growing numb to the harsh realities of Voldemort's war.

Thanks to everyone that has stuck with the story, and a special thanks to everyone who took the time to leave a review.

Question of the Chapter:

If you could have changed only one thing about the Potter series, what would it be?

I'll do my best to answer every review.

Disclaimer: The assorted characters, settings, and other minutiae that come from the Harry Potter books are not mine. Any other things that don't show up in the books or movies are mine, subject to some law or the other.

As always many thanks to the chem prof for his wonderful beta work. Any remaining mistakes can be attributed to my account.

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The massacre in Hogsmeade and the fallout from it highlighted just how badly things appeared to be for those people in the Wizarding part of Britain. Many parents had entertained the notion of pulling their children out of Hogwarts, before the reality of the situation sunk in. There was no safe place in their little world any longer, just as there hadn't been during Voldemort's first reign of terror.

Would they pull their children out of Hogwarts just to make them even larger targets? Hogwarts at least had Albus Dumbledore and the Boy-Who-Lived. If they couldn't stand up to the dark lord no one could.

.....

Harry was quietly sitting in the Gryffindor common room gazing off into space as Neville sat off to his side tending to his Mimulus mimbletonia as the few people milling around in the room really weren't much in the mood for talking.

Classes had been cancelled for the first three days of the week in remembrance for all of the victims of the attack, and to allow the students some time to grieve with their friends. The warm blast that had carried through the weekend and the attack seemed to surrender to a cold blast that had snow on the ground and students outside having snowball fights.

The first and second years weren't nearly as affected as the older students, who all at least lost an acquaintance in the attack if not a close friend. There hadn't been a lot of tears shed, because most of the older students had been exposed to death recently enough over the summer. No, it was definitely a sign of the times when many

teenagers that had just watched their friends die couldn't muster enough energy to properly let them go in their hearts.

"Harry?" Neville's voice broke Harry from his depressed musings.

Harry sighed, his eyes still fixed on something beyond the physical world. "Yeah Neville?"

"Do you ever ask yourself if your parents would be proud of you?" Neville's voice quivered with emotion.

Harry frowned before he turned his gaze to his friend. "Why do you ask, Neville?"

Neville took in a deep gulp of air before he stammered, "It's just...I mean I'm tired of asking myself that question and not knowing the answer."

Harry nodded. "I used to feel like that too."

Neville turned his eyes up hopefully to Harry as he gently set his prized plant on a nearby foot stool. "What happened?"

Harry simply replied, "Neville, your parents gave everything they had to make sure you could grow up. My parents did the same."

Neville nodded looking a little confused, "I know that Harry."

Harry looked straight into Neville's eyes, a gaze that seemed to pierce the other boy to his very soul, "You tell me Neville, would your parents be proud of you?"

Neville blinked. "I-I think they might be now. But, I doubt they were when I was younger."

Harry frowned. "Your parents loved you Neville, pride pales in comparison to that. Nev, if you're happy with whom you are then I guarantee your parents would be proud of you. The question is, are you happy with whom you are?"

Neville's back straightened noticeably as he squared his shoulders before he answered. "Teach me how to fight, Harry."

Harry rubbed his brow just above his eyes. "You're in the defense study group already Neville. You'll learn with everyone else, I promise."

Neville opened his mouth and closed it once before he whispered, "You know that Ginny still wants you don't you?"

Harry visibly swallowed his immediate response of bewilderment at the topic change before he asked, "Why is that Neville?"

Neville simply answered, "Harry, you know that we broke up a while ago, right?"

Harry nodded as Neville continued, "I could tell whenever she looked at you, and then she would look at me and I could see how she was expecting more than I could give her."

Harry cocked his head to the side. "Neville, you do realize how ridiculous this sounds right?"

Neville cracked a sad smile. "Just because Ron doesn't talk about things like this doesn't mean I'm ridiculous for noticing, Harry."

Harry conceded the point with a nod as Neville stretched his legs out. "I don't know what to tell you Harry, and I know Ginny wouldn't ever try to break you and Hermione up. But, this isn't about that, not really anyways."

Harry pulled his glasses off and rubbed the lenses in a manner he used to do back in his youth with the Dursleys. "What is it about Neville?"

Neville shrugged. "I want to be better than I am. But, I am willing to work for it. I don't want to look into my friend's eyes and see pity or disappointment. I want to see that they believe in me. I want to see in your eyes that you'd trust me watching your back if you ever needed it."

Neville hesitated for a moment, a small side of him happy to see Harry taken so far off his guard before he asked, "You saw people die at Madam Puddifoot's a few days ago, didn't you Harry?"

Harry nodded as his eyes searched the room before he locked onto Hermione; apparently she was walking Ron through some review for transfiguration in lieu of anything better to do. He really didn't want to rehash that particular set of memories now or anytime soon.

Neville seemed to understand Harry's reticence as he said, "The more people you teach how to fight Harry, the less you'll have to see that in the future."

Neville's comment rung so false in Harry's ears that he simply had to reply with a touch of vehemence. "I think you aren't in touch with reality if you believe that Neville."

Neville lost whatever nerve he had at Harry's reply and visibly seemed to crawl into his shell. "I've spent a lot of time reading about the history of the wizarding world lately Neville, and I tend to think of this world as having three factions."

Neville didn't reply and Harry really didn't care as he continued, "There are two small groups and one large group. You have the dark lords of the world and those that follow them. You have the people that fight the dark lords of the world and usually die or end up miserable. The third group, the group which consists of the majority of the people in this world, they are mindless sheep that follow whichever way the wind blows. Face it Neville, this world, this society is in a state of decay and while I'm trying to do everything I can. Well, a little thing like holding a 15-year-old girl in my arms as she dies tells me that the cycle will continue."

Harry's hair began to sway as though in an invisible breeze as he continued to show more emotion than anyone else, save Hermione, had seen from him in months. "You want to make a difference Neville? You want your parents to be proud? Then help me to break this stupid cycle. Train with me in our study group, work hard in your classes, and when the time comes we can make a difference. But, do

not tell me to train teenagers to become killers, because I can tell you from my own experiences and from reading that doing that isn't a solution, not a real one anyways."

Neville nodded but as he looked at Harry, he could see the great wizard his friend was going to be someday very soon. He had started this conversation with his own agenda, and by the end of it he knew that he would follow Harry to the ends of the earth if that was what his friend wanted.

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Amber liquid stared back into his dark fathomless eyes, one of the few things he had in life that was beyond reproach and beyond question. It was the one vice he allowed himself as he grew older; every night he would have a tumbler of scotch or a tumbler of brandy. They were the only times he allowed himself to relax, here in the safety of his room, away from prying eyes and ghosts he could never really rid himself of.

Two people no longer amongst the living had molded him into the embittered man he was today. Not that his own choices didn't play a big role in putting him in some state of purgatory, where Lily Evans' emerald green eyes taunted him nearly daily from the Gryffindor table in the great hall, while his father's bullying attitude and abusive behaviors also left their own indelible marks on his very soul.

The dark lord's attack on mere school children with giants was just another example of why he refused to reenter the sadistic bastard's service following his return to a body, despite Albus' repeated entreaties. He had value beyond a spy, and it was the only reason the deceptively cunning old headmaster didn't call in an Unbreakable Vow...or two. Speaking of which, a cursory glance to his left and he noted the large batch of blood replenishing potion for the Order was coming along nicely and would be nearly finished by the time he awoke in the morning.

Of course, no matter what his mind focused on, in the dark of the night it always came back to those two ghosts. Even now the hook nosed demon that was his muggle father still elicited a spike of terror

in his heart of hearts. It shamed Severus Snape that he, a skilled adult wizard, feared a long dead muggle, but not all things in life were rational.

Of course rationality had never been possible for him when he thought of the warm and compassionate face of Lily Evans in his dreams and with much more frequency in his nightmares. Even in death he refused to call her a Potter, because that would detract from her value to his heart in some small amount, which was completely unacceptable to the man he had become.

As children she had been the one steadfast bright light in his life, when all he had to look forward to most days were the pain filled screams of his mother, and the occasional beating at the hands of the man he so desperately craved acceptance and love from.

Once at Hogwarts they had drifted apart somewhat, with Lily being a blasted Gryffindor of all things. He could have dealt with a Ravenclaw, but since she was a Gryffindor he couldn't very well have a public friendship with a muggleborn witch, especially in the shadow of the ascension of a new dark lord. Voldemort was wise enough to get influential purebloods under his thrall first, and the trickle down effect led to Slytherin house at Hogwarts. Slytherin house, the place where hate was bred and instilled into impressionable young people, until it became an ingrained characteristic of the house.

He had resisted for five long years, the faded remnants of his friendship with Lily enough for him to see that it was wrong to persecute muggleborn students simply due to their heritage. Then...then the incident after the OWL exams had happened, and he had lost Lily in any form for the rest of his or her life. If he had been stronger he might have resisted the seductive pureblood whisperings of his housemates, namely Bellatrix Black.

But he had not, and he had called Lily a 'mudblood' and he had done so willingly, and with no reservations about it. He had believed for a short time, that he was better than Lily, simply because of her parents not being magical. It was a foolish belief, and ultimately the one that lead him to accept the dark lord's mark freshly out of Hogwarts.

He had just as well as murdered Lily when he handed Voldemort the first part of that prophecy, and that along with the smattering of murdered muggles at his hand meant he was most assuredly going to pay for his crimes when he finally had the good grace to die.

With a sigh he gripped the tumbler and drained the rest of the brandy in the tumbler, the liquid burned on the way down, but it still warmed him in a way that nothing else still in existence could. His Slytherins were not going to repeat the mistakes of the past; if he accomplished nothing else he would manage that.

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Amelia Bones polished her monocle on the jacket she had worn to work under her robes for the day before she turned her attention back to the paperwork that had accumulated on her desk lately. As the head of the DMLE she hadn't been surprised to be nominated as Minister of Magic; her position had traditionally produced many Ministers over the years. While she would accept the post if elected, she really didn't want to deal with politics on the level the Minister would no doubt be asked to.

The outcry following the attacks at Hogsmeade was in her mind, muted if she had to choose a word. The reaction mirrored that of the survivors at the end of Voldemort's first reign of terror, and she couldn't help but shudder at the thought of history repeating itself. She had lost most of her family and the man she loved in the senseless killings that immediately preceded the Potters' great sacrifice on Halloween, and she still felt the ache in her heart to this very day when she thought about it.

Susan had been surprisingly tight lipped about the attacks and her classes, which was something very unusual for her usually cheerful niece. While she wasn't Susan's mother the remnants of the once great and proud Bones family did all live together at Bones Manor, and during the summers she had the pleasure of spending many nights with Susan talking about life and offering her niece advice in how to succeed in the male dominated wizarding world.

She had mentioned once in a letter about perhaps getting some private tutoring for her Defence classes, but when pressed on it at a later date Susan simply shrugged the topic off. Amelia was smart enough to know when not to pry, and this was such a case.

As she thought about the other candidates for the position of Minister Amelia sighed. Macnair wouldn't be elected in a million years. Despite the fact that he had been officially cleared of being Death Eater, that taint wouldn't allow him the chance to be Minister. The anti-Death Eaters sentiments were simply too strong right now, and Amelia was smart enough to know that the man probably had been a Death Eater, and might even still be one.

Rufus Scrimgeour was a man she had a lot of personal experience dealing with; he was a proven quantity in her eyes as an Auror. His skills as a politician did leave something to be desired however. If push came to shove she would support him as Minister with a wait and see sort of approach.

Barty Crouch Sr. on the other hand was as slippery as a politician had any business being, and his moral leanings had been proven to be lacking during the last war and during the subsequent Death Eater trials. While Amelia had no real doubts the man could lead competently, it was the things they would discover years later that had happened behind closed doors that worried her about the man.

Going over casualty figures refocused her on the task at hand. The election would be soon enough, and then she could deal with whatever new reality it would foist upon her. Reading about a dead pair of fourth year Hufflepuffs only steeled her resolve to do the best job she could to ensure Susan would continue to grow up happy and loved.

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Life does go on, and the students of Hogwarts were not immune to this inevitability as classes started back up and the fifth and seventh years were buried in homework to make up for the time missed in preparation for their OWL and NEWT exams. It hadn't been his

original intention, but the attack on Hogsmeade had forced Harry to schedule the second meeting of the defense study group.

The group was assembled without any fanfare and Harry glanced about the room, less nervous glances met his own than the last time and he didn't know exactly what to make of it. It was exactly one week until Christmas, and Harry hedged his bets concerning how focused the members of the group would be this close to the holiday.

"Alright you lot, tonight's meeting we are going to switch things up from what I had originally said. We will be doing some Patronus practice, but instead of working on shields I've decided to stage a mock duel of sorts. Simply stated it will be no holds barred, and if you want to group off to aid your cause you are more than welcome. But, there will only be one witch or wizard standing at the end so keep that in mind. The only spells for use here are Expelliarmus and Stupefy people, we don't want any hard to explain injuries." Harry finished his explanation and stifled a grin as excited murmurs broke through the group at the chance to plot their dueling skills against the others in the room.

Harry nodded after he allowed the group to settle back down before he spoke. "How many of you saw some of the attack a few weeks ago?" He was rather surprised when only five students raised their hands, but he shrugged it off. "Let me share my experience for those of you lucky enough to not see it."

The words seemed to stick in Harry's throat as his mind betrayed him with an image of Marietta's eyes going dim as she died. A warm hand slid into his and squeezed gently, weary green eyes met concerned brown ones and it was enough to start his recollection. "Hermione and I were in Dervish and Banges, talking to someone when we felt the ground rumble. I assume that was the first boulder thrown by the giants to fall. We both sprinted out of the store just in time to see another boulder smash the roof of Madam Puddifoot's."

Harry swallowed thickly as a couple of the members that had lost friends stifled sobs. "We sat there and watched the Aurors throw complex spells at the giants and not make a dent. Aurors who were trained in how to deal with giants panicked and forgot their training.

They were throwing stunners at giants for Merlin's sake. Then the strange creature came and took two of the giants down, or the entire building would have been lost."

The room was completely silent now; whether it was out of respect or something else Harry couldn't tell. "Hermione and I wanted to help the Aurors, but what spells do you know of to deal with a giant? I've read about a couple of spells that might have worked, but it's not like we have the opportunity to practice against giants. These are most likely the kinds of situations you'll find yourselves in if any of you charge into an attack, situations where you'll be completely out of your depth."

A murmur of disappointment spread through the group and Harry raised his hand. "I've dueled Death Eaters people, and I've even been lucky enough to survive those duels. Keep in mind I've had more than my fair share of experience dealing with dark wizards and dark creatures, namely the dementors and a basilisk. Ron and Hermione will attest to the fact if you don't believe me when I say that."

The group was now listening with rapt attention as Harry continued, "But, I wouldn't count on luck for any of you to get you through a duel, and with that in mind I'll be teaching you the defense curriculum and the Patronus charm in case you come across a Dementor. Once we've worked through that, I'll teach you all some evasion and alternative defense techniques. I'll also be handing out programmable emergency portkeys, because apparition isn't possible for people our age."

The group was nodding thoughtfully as Ernie McMillan raised his hand and Harry acknowledged him with a nod. "I say, that's very generous of you Harry old chap." Ron rolled his eyes at Ernie's pompous attitude and Hannah Abbott likewise couldn't help but giggle at her housemate's typical behavior.

Harry smiled slightly. "It's for me as much as it for you guys, trust me. I don't want to attend any more funerals if I can help it, ok?"

The room went quiet at this, and Harry nodded his point had been made. "You can see the trunk in the corner over there, line up for Patronus practice people."

Hermione shifted with Harry as he walked over to the corner in preparation. As Harry released the boggart she murmured quietly, "You have the presence of a teacher, Harry."

Harry glanced sideways at her and whispered in reply, "I wish I could afford to make this fun and games for everyone, but you've seen what kind of stuff can happen when people aren't prepared."

Hermione nodded as Harry made comments about each attempt, encouraging when necessary and congratulating those that managed corporeal patronus. Neville's patronus appeared to be a polar bear, but calling it a bear seemed to be close enough. Surprisingly enough, Luna managed a hare on her first try, and Ron had finally managed a formless blob that was nearly a corporeal patronus. Every single member managed at the very least a passable shield of mist, although it was highly unlikely that any other patronus aside from Harry's would drive off multiple dementors if they came.

As he locked the boggart back into its charmed trunk Harry looked around at the group with something akin to satisfaction. "You all did much better this time. I'd say all of you could at least hold off a Dementor long enough to get away."

Hermione nodded. "Considering the Patronus charm is a NEWT level charm at the very least, you all did quite well." Glancing over to Harry she added, "You've seen Harry's patronus before, but Harry and I agreed to give you all some idea of how easy it will be to cast a patronus once you've practiced it enough."

Harry nodded and they pointed their wands uttering "Expecto Patronum" in normal voices. Almost immediately a very bright stag and a slightly less bright doe bounded out of the wands taking a quick lap around the room before stopping in front of their casters and nuzzling each other with their ethereal noses.

The group was utterly gob smacked. A few students remembered seeing Dumbledore's patronus during the Quidditch match a few years ago, and Harry's easily seemed to be a match for it in size and brightness. The significance of Harry and Hermione's patroni matching wasn't lost on the girls in the room, and a few hard crushes for the Boy-Who-Lived died at that very moment.

Harry felt refreshed at having Prongs out for a brief stroll; being in such close proximity to a magical manifestation of positive emotions was rather close to hearing Fawkes sing when he felt downhearted.

After a minute of just sitting in the middle of the room the patroni dissolved into thin air and Harry nodded. "I taught Hermione how to cast a patronus last year, and I learned during my third year from Remus Lupin."

With a quick scan of the room he continued, "Now for the duel, I expect all of you to remain under control and remain limited to the two spells I told you to use. Anyone that can't follow those directions will be removed from the group, am I understood?"

The group remained silent and Harry motioned to Hermione to speak. "I am going to cast a spell that will randomly send everyone to a color coded position throughout the room. Go to your assigned spot and then wait for the signal for the duel to start. The final person standing will win a prize of sorts, so give it your best effort." Hermione flicked her wand and the colors were randomly selected and each person went to their assigned spots, wands tightly in hand.

Harry gently took Hermione's hand as they walked to the safe vantage point the room had provided specifically for the duel. Hermione had a small smile on her face as she compared her expectations of her first relationship with the reality of the one she shared with Harry. The way things were going at the moment, it might very well be the only relationship she would embark upon in her lifetime and she knew that she would be loved and cherished by Harry if that was the case.

As they took their places Harry noticed the smile on Hermione's face as he raised their linked hands and kissed her knuckles, "What has you smiling like that?"

Hermione gazed at him lovingly, her heart in her eyes before she darted in and gave him a soft kiss, "Just thinking about how happy you make me."

Harry smiled softly, a smile he reserved especially for her. "You make me just as happy." After a moment Harry raised the tip of his wand to his throat and cast Sonorous. "The duel will start at the sound of the percussive hex, good luck and remember to follow the rules." Silently he cast the percussive hex and the room was lit up with spells being flung across the room.

In the first minute of the duel half of the group had been either stunned or disarmed, and those people still conscious merely sat down on the ground and tried to stay out of the way. Harry noted that Ron had gone down in that initial barrage, and he was barely able to mask his emotions to be only a hint of displeasure at his friend's showing. Daphne had been felled from Slytherin house, while Blaise was well fortified using a couple of stunned people as a shield from incoming spells. Luna and Ginny were still around, using surprising agility to dodge spells and stun others. Neville had actually disarmed or stunned the most of the remaining people, and Harry vowed to help his friend avoid the fate of his parents.

Slowly students were whittled away leaving Luna, Neville, and Susan Bones as the final three duelers. Hermione was rather pleased that two of the final three remaining were girls, because while not as prevalent as the pureblood bigotry, there was a fair amount of gender discrimination in the wizarding world also.

Neville had kept a steady stream of spells rolling from his wand for the entire duel, and he felt more alive in those few brief moments than he had the rest of his life. Both of his parents had been very good Aurors, and Neville liked to think it was in his blood to excel at stuff like this. With a rapid fire chain of stunners he managed to eliminate Susan, meaning he was one person away from winning the prize, and more importantly to him a bit of respect.

Luna was completely unknown to the other members of the group in terms of her abilities; she had carried around the 'Loony' tag her entire time at Hogwarts and as a result others underestimated her. Of course, her instructors weren't amongst that number seeing as how she was the best student of her year and had been since her second year.

She watched Neville stun Susan and she could see two different paths she could take now. She could take her chances at beating Neville, who obviously craved respect from the others in the group if his inspired performance had anything to do with it. The other option available being that she would get hit with a 'lucky' shot from Neville, and retain her reputation of being underestimated.

As she dodged to the left out of the way of the boy's torrent of spells, Neville managed to take the decision out of her hand as a stunner grazed her shoulder, not knocking her out but definitely slowing her down. The follow up stunner finished the job, giving the win to Neville.

The room slowly shifted as Harry and Hermione returned to the main floor, the downed students being returned their wands or revived. He had been pleased for the most part with the results of the duel and the smile on his face showed as much. "Good job everyone; I'll send a personal critique to all of you over the holiday break to give you some ideas for improvement. Now, let's give Neville a hand for being a menace out there and winning the duel."

The group clapped in appreciation and acknowledgment of Neville's victory before Harry reached into the pocket of his robes and handed a slip of paper to him. Harry explained, "This is a gift certificate to Ollivander's Wand Shoppe. The amount you won is sufficient to buy any one thing in the store, or several smaller things. Congratulations Neville."

As Neville blushed from all of the attention his shoulders subconsciously squared. He had a letter to write to his gran.

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Dumbledore looked around the chambers of the Wizengamot, feeling hopeful that the end to the tedious process of electing a new Minister was about to come to an end. Percy was taking meticulous care to properly count the secret ballots, and tally them for the proper candidates. As the final vote flashed into the charmed ballot box Percy glanced at the vote and made another tally on his sheet.

Folding the piece of parchment in a very precise manner he handed the slip to Dumbledore who took it gratefully and unfolded the paper in an equally precise manner. The results had been a bit surprising. He had expected Madam Bones to win the vote, even if the women had overtly made it known she hadn't wanted the position if she could avoid it. She was the most highly regarded head of the DMLE in many years, and preferred to stay on in that role if she could.

Dumbledore made an intricate wand movement before an unusual toll rang through the room. The toll signified a new Minister had been chosen, an event which was enough to also stop any side conversations between Wizengamot members.

"I would like to thank all of the candidates for making this a most pleasurable experience. Now, it is my pleasure to announce the 60th Minister of Magic in our history, Mr. Rufus Scrimgeour. Mr. Scrimgeour will be sworn into office on December 24th at the inauguration spot in the atrium. Thank you and have a happy holiday season. The next Wizengamot meeting will be held in February at the prearranged meeting time. Good day." With that Dumbledore stood and regally walked out of the chambers to the nearest FLOO connection. He would need to think hard about what impact the new Minister would have on the war.

A/N: There it is another chapter folks. I appreciate the response for last chapter, and I'll do my best to have the next chapter out next week some time. Writing time will be easier to come by over the holidays so expect a reasonably normal updating schedule.

Question of the Chapter:

Was the introduction of the Deathly Hallows in the seventh book a good thing, or should JKR have made some subtle mentions earlier in the series?

As always I'll do my best to respond to every review. Thanks for reading and reviewing.

Disclaimer: It's JKR's world not mine. None of the characters, settings, or insane plot devices are mine. In other words the final battle won't involve a malfunctioning wand, coming back from the dead, or anything like that.

As always my eternal gratitude goes to my beta chem prof for his wonderful beta work. Any mistakes are strictly someone else's fault in a completely different country.

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The next few weeks passed quickly, and before Harry knew what had happened he along with Hermione and the Weasleys were in the Hog's Head Tavern being ushered to a private Floo connection in the back of the seedy bar. As the oddly familiar bar owner handed them each small pouches of Floo powder Harry cottoned on to the fact that the man was an Order member. He didn't remember ever seeing the man at Grimmauld over the course of the summer, but then again that didn't mean all that much.

As the group was ushered through the Floo connection Harry couldn't help the tingle of excitement that ran through him at the thought of his first family Christmas ever. He didn't consider himself a material person, but something about Christmas had always excited him, even when he was forced to make Christmas breakfast for the Dursleys as the rest of the family opened presents in the den.

The Floo in the main parlor of Grimmauld Place flashed and Harry tumbled through, barely maintaining his balance due to the transferred grace his animagus form afforded him. Hermione and the others had already vacated the room to see various family members, and all that greeted him was comfortable silence, although he could hear the excited murmurs of the others in a nearby room.

Harry shrugged as he pulled his wand and reversed the shrinking charm on his trunk and Hedwig's cage. His familiar was likely already at Grimmauld having been sent ahead the night before. The soft patter of approaching footsteps caught Harry's attention and he grinned at the big black dog sitting in the doorway. Harry shifted to his panther form and with two leaping bounds tackled the large black dog.

The pair rolled around playfully for a couple of minutes, Harry being careful to only pat at Sirius's head with his paws as the large dog tried to slobber all over the larger cat.

After a few minutes they were both breathing heavily as they transformed back and Sirius's grin was much more relaxed and mischievous than Harry could ever remember seeing. Harry rolled on to his back, the lush rug in the room providing enough support as he gazed up at the ceiling. "Well, that was an unusual way to say hello."

Sirius chuckled before he straightened up in the chair he had taken residence in and asked in a mock affronted air, "What, am I not allowed to slobber on my godson when he comes home for Christmas?"

Harry laughed. "I'd prefer a nice hug over Padfoot slobber any day of the week."

Sirius nodded as he slowly rose from his chair. "I'll keep that in mind kiddo." Glancing at the trunk he softly called out, "Dobby." The little elf popped into the room and Sirius asked, "Would you put Harry's trunk and cage in his room for me please?" Dobby merely nodded as he snapped his fingers and the things vanished, and he vanished himself a moment later with a soft pop.

Sirius offered Harry a hand up and wrapped an arm around his shoulder as he led him out of the room. "I have to make a little trip this afternoon, but tonight there is an Order meeting and I was told you could attend if you wanted to. Apparently Dumbledore thinks you might have some fresh insight to a few problems we're dealing with. Once the meeting is over, I'll introduce you to a Potter family tradition that your grandpa and James introduced me to. Now, go snog your girlfriend or something."

Harry shook his head at Sirius as the man ducked into a side room and disappeared from sight just as he entered the dining room and saw all of the others from Hogwarts conversing with various Order members and family. Hermione noticed Harry's entrance and waved him over to join her chat with her parents, temporary refugees at

Grimmauld over the holidays, seeing as how it was the only way to guarantee they'd see their daughter over the break.

Michael smiled at the young man who had grown some more since the last time he'd seen him at Hogwarts. "Hello Harry, my daughter here was just telling us about your merits as a tutor." Harry wanted to pull his hair out before the man's words continued, "She told us all about the help you gave that younger student, in err Charms class, was it?"

Harry exhaled deeply in relief. "Yes, I've found I quite enjoy teaching and tutoring. But, Hermione knows loads more than I do, so she'd be a better teacher than me any day."

Bianca merely smiled in response to the implied compliment of Hermione's intelligence before said daughter chimed in, "Harry, there's a difference between knowing something and being able to teach it to someone. You're loads better at teaching than me."

Harry merely shrugged in response before he turned to Bianca. "How have you enjoyed your new place?"

Bianca sighed, "Well, it's not exactly home yet, but we're working on it." Smiling strangely she added, "Your headmaster tells me the place we're staying is a Potter family property?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, but I'm afraid I don't know much more about it, other than it belonged to my great-great uncle. Apparently he emigrated to Australia looking for adventure and ended up marrying an Aborigine witch. But, that's all the more I've been able to find out about him."

Michael and Bianca nodded, apparently intrigued by Harry's story, but he spotted someone he wanted a word with. Softly he said, "If you'd excuse me for a moment, I need to speak to someone else."

Harry walked over to Bill Weasley and gave the man a punch on the arm. "Wotcher Bill."

Bill laughed and mussed Harry's hair up just as he always did with Ron. "What's up squirt?"

Harry shook his head and grinned. "Have you figured out what you're going to do about what the Professor suggested?"

Bill simply nodded. "Yes, I planned on talking to him about it after the meeting tonight. I'll have my mum grab you and you can join in."

Harry simply waved Bill's comment away. "Not necessary, Sirius told me Professor Dumbledore wants me around for tonight's meeting. We can talk to him afterwards though. I imagine this is a pet project of the Professor's."

Bill looked thoughtful for a moment before he asked, "Harry, why do you always refer to Dumbledore as Professor, instead of Headmaster?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair before he answered simply, "I've learned more from Professor Dumbledore than any other person alive."

Bill opened his mouth to reply but shut it before a word escaped. "I reckon that makes more sense than calling him Headmaster now that I think of it. He is always teaching, isn't he?"

Harry merely nodded before Hermione grabbed his hand and dragged him back into the crowd, receiving an understanding look from Bill who began searching for his own girlfriend, the very beautiful and very French Fleur Delacour.

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Sirius looked around the Headmaster's office in Hogwarts and reminisced with a smile at the number of times the various pranks of the Marauders had landed him and his cohorts in this very office. Today he was here under different, but no less disconcerting circumstances. Dumbledore had requested he come by for a chat, and now the old wizard had him waiting as he had been caught up in a staff meeting. Sirius's gaze took in the room and he couldn't help

but smile as his eyes locked with the infinite wisdom that could be found in Dumbledore's phoenix companion. Fawkes narrowed one of his eyes in an eerily McGonagall-esque mannerism, seemingly measuring Sirius before he trilled once, apparently giving the Hogwarts alumnus his approval.

Sirius, feeling more at ease with the approval, rose from his seat to do a bit of inspection on the rest of the room. Dumbledore's desk was covered with tiny intricate looking objects that occasionally let out puffs of smoke, or made strange whistling noises. The far wall in the back of the room was covered by a large bookcase, and the contents of his mini library were enough to make old Madam Pince green with envy. He was about to make a closer inspection of the specific titles there when the door swung open, admitting Dumbledore who was carrying a bundle of papers. He smiled benignly at Sirius and simply said, "If you could give me a moment, I'll be right with you."

Sirius nodded and returned to his seat, that anxious feeling in his gut having returned for reasons he had no idea of. With a moment to ponder that feeling, indignation crept into his thoughts. He had spent twelve years in Azkaban or on the run after his escape - a little meeting with Dumbledore wasn't going to cause this feeling in him. The long-bearded wizard returned from an antechamber to the main office and took a seat behind his desk before he spoke. "Let me put you at ease if my request alarmed you. I am merely calling you here to see how you continue to settle in after you've fully regained your freedom."

Sirius sighed. "I don't know what to tell you, err Albus, I still haven't fully acclimated myself. Remus has been on me to try my hand at dating again, but it all seems so trivial now. I even let him and Nymph set me up on an accursed blind date. The poor woman basically ran out on me when she found that her blind date was the recently exonerated Sirius Black..." Sirius grimaced as he recalled that particular memory. The witch had been attractive but like many others in the Wizarding world she couldn't move beyond the simplest of biases. Once again he was reminded of the mantra echoing in his head, I'd be better off taking Remus and Harry into the muggle world with me.

Dumbledore nodded. "I can quite understand why you might feel that way Sirius. Many who spend time in such a confining situation as yours have had similar issues. I suggest you find an activity which allows you to relax every day; one which hopefully doesn't involve Harry or any of your pranks. Part of being an adult is accepting the things which you can not change, and having the wisdom to acknowledge the reality of the world."

Sirius sighed and muttered, "I know how cruel the world can be."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, you have seen more than your fair share of cruelty in your short life. But, I believe you have not grasped the power of the first part of that statement. You can not change what Pettigrew did all those years ago, but you must accept it. There are many people who love you, and they need you to accept it for their sake as well as your own."

Sirius swallowed thickly before he murmured quietly, "I know James and Lily are dead, but you have to understand they were the family I never had, and then they were just gone. Harry was gone before I took a moment to think, and my life was over. How, do I move on from that?"

Dumbledore stood from his seat and walked around his desk before placing a hand on Sirius's shoulder. "You move on from it as you should have months ago, by accepting the love and support of your friends and family. James and Lily would have wanted you to do so, I'm sure of it."

Sirius exhaled a deep breath and nodded. His head had already known as much, it was his heart that was having the hard time.

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The inhabitants of Grimmauld Place eventually scattered to their various rooms to unpack and settle into their home for the next couple of weeks. Harry was quickly unpacking in his room and Dobby was helping when he could, as the contents of his trunk went to their proper places in the room. As he organized his books based upon the few assignments he had to complete there was a soft knock on his

opened door. Turning, he smiled as Remus stepped into his room. Harry simply appreciated the soft-spoken unassuming manner of the man. Remus usually let his actions do the speaking, and to the untrained eye you could miss his intricacies.

Harry nodded. "Hey Moony."

Remus grinned. "How are you Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "Good as can be expected I suppose." Quirking an eyebrow as he looked around. "I might need you to accompany me to Gringott's tomorrow."

Remus' face became shrewd and calculating in an instant as he casually said, "Oh?"

Harry immediately picked up Remus' change. "I'd like to visit my family's vault."

Remus simply nodded. There was no pity in his eyes, only understanding. "Of course."

Remus looked thoughtful for a moment before he shut the door behind him and quietly asked, "So the Prophet mentioned a trained Nundu managed to thwart the giant attack in Hogsmeade. Wouldn't happen to know anything about that would you?"

Harry tensed and then sighed ruefully. "I had to do something, Moony."

Remus walked over to Harry and in a decidedly paternal gesture he grasped Harry's shoulder and said, "I'm proud of you. I'm sure it's not something you've heard much over the years. But I'm proud of the man you are becoming, even if I may not have been there for you like I should have, and I'm sure your parents would say the same."

Harry relaxed from his tense state. "I - err- thanks Moony." The words had lodged in his throat and he didn't know exactly how he should feel about the Marauder's kind words.

Remus squeezed Harry's shoulder one more time in recognition of everything that went unsaid between the two before his grip slackened and he turned and left the room, opening the door and leaving it open as it had been when he entered.

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Harry's introduction to the Order of the Phoenix proper was to begin in less than fifteen minutes, and he had managed to get a seat at the main table between Remus and Sirius. Remus had been working through some notes in a small binder he had brought with him, and Sirius...well he had been rather quiet since he returned from whatever meeting he had attended earlier.

Harry glanced around the room at the members already present and he chuckled as he watched Tonks sitting with Hestia Jones and Kingsley Shacklebolt all members of the DMLE. Tonks was cycling through hair colors as casually as normal people blink, while Kingsley boomed a laugh in his deep baritone at something Hestia had just told him. Tonks and Kingsley were Aurors, and Hestia worked in the legal section of the department as an aide to the prosecution.

At the far end of the table, near a large and adorned chair, the same chair Sirius had explained was normally occupied by the head of the Black family, were some older witches and wizards. Harry turned to Remus to get his input on the Order members present he had never seen before but Sirius beat him to the punch. "That's the old crowd right there Harry. Some of those Order members even fought with Dumbledore against the Knights of Walpurgis. They were big Grindelwald supporters here in Britain during the 30's and 40's when old Grindy was causing panic back on the continent. They're Dumbledore's biggest supporters in the Order, and they think everything he says is the gospel even if we know better."

Harry nodded his thanks to Sirius at the reasonably detailed answer. He didn't necessarily need to know names to understand the impact they might have on the meeting. He could always finagle the names later from Sirius or Remus anyways.

Continuing to scan the group Harry's eyes next fell upon Mad-Eye Moody, and the retired Auror was sitting next to Professor Snape, although they weren't conversing at all. It was strange, the changes the past year and a half had wrought in Professor Snape. Instead of constantly being concerned about bullying the students of the school, he had become something of an academic. If he was seen out in public he usually had a potions book in hand, taking care to make notes in the margins as he went.

Of course, the professors of Hogwarts were supposedly some of the best in the magical world and it stood to reason that they had other professional aspirations. It was proof of the further humanizing of Professor Snape, when students could harbor such thoughts and have no reason to suspect that it would bring a punishment.

Harry's gaze continued to travel around the room and he couldn't help but think of the many different kinds of people Dumbledore had gathered for the group. Hagrid was talking animatedly to Charlie Weasley, the second oldest Weasley child, no doubt about the half giant's not so secret ambition, raising dragons.

Bill was sitting to Charlie's other side, and he was conversing with a stately witch. She looked familiar to Harry but he had no idea what her name was. As if he felt Harry's eyes on him Bill glanced directly towards Harry and nodded, as though to acknowledge his presence and confirm the meeting with Dumbledore afterwards.

Mrs. Weasley was filling the gap between the stately witch that Bill had been talking to and the old crowd, and there were a few absent members that Harry would know if he saw them. Glancing down at his watch Harry frowned. Dumbledore still hadn't appeared and the meeting was to have started three minutes ago.

As if he had been summoned, Dumbledore flashed into the room with a firm grip on Fawkes tail feathers, but the present Order members remained largely unperturbed as if it was a typical occurrence. The group did trail off from the conversations they had been involved in as Dumbledore swiftly began the meeting. "I apologize for my slightly tardy arrival, but I believe it was for good cause and most of you will

agree with me when I come upon it later. Let's begin now, shall we? Elphias if you would be so kind?"

There were murmurs of agreement as an older man stood up. He was wearing a strange looking pointed hat and his face was rather pinched. "I've been poking around with some of my conservative pureblooded friends trying to keep my ear to the ground to know if You-Know-Who has been recruiting. As far as I know only three traditionally neutral families have been contacted - the Zabini family, the Butler family, and the neutral branch of the Avery family. These are similar to the feelers that the dark lord's followers put out at the beginning of the last war."

Dumbledore nodded his thanks before he gazed around the room, his eyes locked onto Harry's and he said, "Mr. Potter, what would you suggest we do with this information?"

Harry arched his eyebrow; so that's the game Dumbledore was playing at when he invited him to the meeting. Either he was testing Harry, or he was genuinely interested in his opinion. "Aside from giving the same families offers to join the Order as well as other families similarly sitting on the fence, I'd say there isn't really a lot we can do. Voldemort is going to recruit new followers; otherwise he'd be a pretty lame dark lord, wouldn't he?"

There were murmurs of agreement for most of the group and Dumbledore's follow up question was asked with a twinkle in his eye. "So you do not believe everyone can be saved?"

Harry looked at Dumbledore in disbelief. "You mean saved like my parents Professor? How about saved like Marietta Edgecombe? You know I was the last thing she saw before she died sir. A fifteen year old girl died in my arms, and I couldn't do a blasted thing about the piece of wood lodged in her throat." Several in the room shifted uncomfortably. Harry couldn't tell if it was because he was revealing some realities about the war, or if they just didn't like being told about a dying girl's last moments.

Sighing, he continued, "I'm not saying we should resort to their tactics sir, but its rather obvious that staying on the defensive isn't working if

we really are in the saving people business here. We need to make Voldemort rethink his tactics by exploiting the weaknesses of them."

Dumbledore was now looking rather intrigued by Harry's little diatribe, while Harry was just feeling irritated at himself for laying most of his cards down at the beginning of a meeting on a 'trap' question laid by the headmaster. The rest of the group looked suitably shocked for the most part, but Harry didn't know whether to think the nods coming from Moody and the other Aurors was a good thing or not. Remus and Sirius were wearing suitably smug grins, as if Harry's words had been similar to ones they had said and been ignored for saying.

After a pregnant silence Dumbledore finally asked, "What would you suggest Harry?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Seeing as how this is my first Order meeting and I have no clue what you people know about Voldemort's tactics, I wouldn't suggest anything. Once I'm brought up to speed, I'd be happy to offer some suggestions."

Dumbledore nodded, as did many others in open approval at Harry's approach. "Very well, if you do think of something as the meeting continues feel free to make your thoughts known." Harry returned a curt nod and Dumbledore turned his gaze to Hestia Jones. "Ms. Jones if you would be so kind as to give your report next."

Hestia Jones stood. She appeared to be roughly the same age as Remus and Sirius although that was a bit misleading considering how hard many of those years had been for the Marauders. She was somewhat attractive, but her face was somewhat pinched as if she had been under a great deal of stress of late. "Thank you sir. Madam Bones has been apprised of the guard detail we have stationed in the Department of Mysteries and she has successfully deduced that it is to prevent Voldemort from attaining something of value. While she didn't indicate that she would offer Aurors to aid in the endeavor, she did say that we could carry on as we have been without any concern for Ministry interference." Dumbledore shot her a meaningful glance and she continued, "In short, we are guarding a prophecy in the Department of Mysteries for those who didn't already know. We have

a guard on hand on Level Nine every night, to prevent Voldemort from stealing it."

Harry saw the look between Dumbledore and Jones and understood this was his second chance to swing the cricket bat for the night. "I assume the prophecy you speak of has some implications for Voldemort."

Dumbledore answered, "You know the prophecy already Harry, and yes Voldemort does have some idea of the first two lines of the prophecy. A Death Eater overheard its original telling and reported them to the dark lord."

Harry nodded, tucking that valuable little morsel of information away for later. He didn't notice Snape's flinch and it was just as well. "So Voldemort knows the first two lines and I imagine only a few people can actually physically take the prophecy otherwise he'd already have had someone under the Imperius grab it for him."

Dumbledore nodded. "An astute observation Harry, and yes only the subjects of the prophecy can obtain the sphere in the Hall of Prophecies."

Harry nodded, thinking hard before he offered, "Why don't I just go in and grab the prophecy and destroy it before Voldemort can get it?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "That would be inadvisable Harry. Tipping Tom off would lose us the one active target we are aware of. If nothing else he is forced to expend resources in his attempts to obtain the prophecy."

Harry sighed. "Fine then, let me grab the sphere and we can alter it before we return it to the Hall of Prophecies. Then instead of playing guard duty for the prophecy we can concentrate on laying a trap for Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Turn our one strategic strength into some actual gains in the process."

Dumbledore blinked in surprise as Moody barked a laugh. "I told you Albus. I told you Potter would surprise you when I suggested he be entered into the Order this summer."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Yes well, that is a very good plan indeed Harry. I'm afraid we have been fighting a defensive war for so long, that such a move had not occurred to me."

Harry nodded as the rest of the Order watched in rapt attention as the youngest person present spoke to Dumbledore on a level much closer to an equal than they would have ever guessed. Perhaps even more surprising was the grace with which Dumbledore accepted the fact, which earned Harry more credit than his well conceived plan.

Dumbledore glanced around. "All of those in favor of Mr. Potter's proposed course of action?"

All of the Order members, save the old crowd and Mrs. Weasley, who was looking more in disapproval of Harry being present than the plan itself, agreed to the plan and just like that the Order embarked on a new direction in the war.

Dumbledore nodded to himself before he looked indecisive for a split second; it was far too short for anyone not paying complete attention to notice but Harry did and smiled to himself. "Mr. Potter's plan will be implemented, and that brings me to a matter I fear I have put off for too long. I would suggest we offer Mr. Potter full access to our meetings and our intelligence, with the one caveat being he not be allowed full Order membership and any assignments until he is at least 16 years of age."

Mrs. Weasley did relax incrementally at the concession offered by Dumbledore as did the rest of the old crowd. The concession obviously had been made to them alone to remove any objections of Harry's future presence at the Order meetings.

Dumbledore smiled wryly. "Based upon the expressions on your faces I see no need to bring this matter to a vote. Mr. Potter will be working with Alastor and Kingsley on implementation of his proposed course of action. I ask that you discuss this on your own time over the holidays. Mr. Potter will be at Grimmauld for the majority of the break; you can reach him here for any discussion gentlemen." Moody's eye

swiveled over to Harry and he nodded, as Kingsley bowed his head in agreement but otherwise made no other motions.

Dumbledore sighed. "In interest of bringing the meeting to the end at a reasonable time we will shelve the remaining reports until after the New Year at the next meeting. Should anything of immediate concern become apparent to any of you, please bring it to my attention immediately. Now as to the reason I was late to this evening's meeting, the new Minister of Magic requested my audience to discuss some issues he was concerned with." The group all perked up at this. While several knew Rufus Scrimgeour to look at him, none present were anything more than acquaintances to the man who would be sworn in as new Minister in a matter of days.

Dumbledore continued, "First we discussed the war against Voldemort, and it should bolster you all to know Minister Scrimgeour will be a man of action in that regard. He implied Auror recruitment from outside of Britain would increase, and a possible request for aid from the International Confederation of Wizards might be forthcoming. Due to my position as Supreme Mugwump on that governing board I did inform the minister that the ICW would be happy to supply aid to him if he makes a formal request."

The Order did appear to be bolstered. Having to work around Fudge had been a nightmare in its own right, and it had only gotten worse near the end of his reign of impotence. Tonks could be heard muttering, "Bout frigging time."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes, I quite agree Nymphadora, it is about time." Tonks winced at the use of her first name, but Dumbledore paid it no heed. "As to matters of concern, Rufus did suggest that the Order be disbanded and that the Ministry would have things well in hand in regards to Tom in a matter of months. Additionally, he wished for myself and Mr. Potter to make public endorsements of his actions in the war when the proper time came to do so. In exchange, he offered to share any information he might come across in regards to the war."

At this several Order members stood and began to yell in protest. Harry was not amongst those standing and despite the fact that he

was younger than everyone else present he couldn't believe how naive they were acting. Of course, Scrimgeour would want the war fought solely on his merits. That would set him up for accruing the credit for winning the war if it happened. It was a classic politician's grab for even more power, and it could be dealt with much more easily than outright incompetence.

Dumbledore watched the yelling for a moment with a resigned attitude before his eyes scrolled over to Harry and he was surprised to find the young man not amongst the protesters. Raising his hand he said, "Yes, yes it is quite upsetting and I assure you I have no plans of following the Minister's wishes in this regard." Appeased, the meeting settled back down before he addressed the object of his musings. "Harry, you were the only other one specifically asked to give the Minister an endorsement. What are your thoughts on the matter?"

Harry wanted to laugh at the sheer absurdity of the situation but managed to suppress his laughter to a wry looking smile. "I'd say this Scrimgeour is a politician, and his requests fit the mold for what I would have expected for the typical wartime Minister."

Dumbledore nodded and waved his hand asking for Harry to elaborate. "Obviously he sees the war as his chance to establish himself as the Minister of Magic for many years to come. If everything goes how he pictures it in his mind, Voldemort and the Death Eaters will roll over in a couple of months and he'll be the great hero of the war, one who also has the support of the two wizards viewed as having the most political capital in the country. It's hard to disavow the man after we publicly support him, and if we tried he'd accuse us of trying to usurp his power. It could easily be interpreted as such, and given the public's willingness to believe everything printed in the Prophet he would succeed."

Most of the Order members were gaping in shock at the political acumen Harry showed in that one explanation. Mrs. Weasley blushed furiously at having been one of those devout believers of the Prophet's half truths in the past. When stated as Harry just had, she did have to agree with him on the majority of his points. However, she couldn't help but blurt, "Would you publicly endorse him Harry dear?"

Harry almost wanted to shoot Molly a patronizing statement to see how she would react, but he resisted and replied, "If he did manage to actually follow through on his promises, sure I would. But as I said before, he is a politician and it is a career that doesn't lend itself to following through on promises often. Additionally, I've seen enough Aurors and Ministry personnel to know that if Scrimgeour tries to take the war to Voldemort he'll be destroyed and the rest of the ministry with him! Let's face it, magical Britain is ripe for dark lords for the very reason that politicians like Fudge are handed power on a platter. The people of this country are too afraid to act, lest they offend the wrong people or make the wrong enemy. If they do act, it's to show off their own perceived superiority over other people or the other magical species. As a society it has failed in every meaningful way."

Most of the group paled at Harry's bold but honest answer and the Aurors present couldn't help but feel a little slighted at his degradation of their skills. The older members bristled at the thought of a mere teenager so blithely berating their way of life, the way they had always lived and planned to continue to do so. Dumbledore had to blink at Harry's blunt words. He had a hand, a very large hand, in molding the country into its current form. He could admit freely that he had made mistakes along the line, but to be told that the entire society had failed, well that required him to take pause.

He weighed Harry's words against the idyllic crusades of his own youth for a moment before he dismissed those thoughts. Harry's statements were well argued and he surely could make examples of why he was right. It was then that he saw the primary need for Harry, beyond being the future wizard to take his various mantles and to defeat a dark lord. The young man had seen more death and more destruction than many much older than he, and yet he had developed this ability to see the world for what it was. A skill that he had to admit was uncanny.

Deciding not to make a statement admonishing or praising Harry's words Dumbledore stood. "I believe that is enough for the night. Mr. Potter, if you would be so kind as to stay behind so we could talk?" The older members assumed this meant Dumbledore would dress

down the uppity youngster and left the meeting feeling much more righteous than they had any right to.

The Aurors left the meeting feeling disgruntled, and yet it wasn't so much directed at Harry as it was at their entire world in general. Attacking a society as a failure was something much larger than an individual's petty concerns after all.

Sirius remembered similar arguments from Lily during their seventh year at Hogwarts, and he felt his heart swell with pride. Harry was going to be a fine man, heck he already was, and he knew Lily and James would be proud of their son.

Remus agreed with the majority of Harry's points, although the delivery left something to be desired. Being a werewolf in a world that oftentimes viewed him as being subhuman he knew the world was a terribly imperfect place. In his heart of hearts he wished with every fiber of his being that Harry would be the one to make the changes their society so sorely needed, and he would help him in any way he could.

As the Order members had finished shuffling out save for Bill and Harry, Dumbledore gave Harry a strange look. "I must admit, I had not expected you to make such a strong statements tonight. Although, I dare say you opened many eyes with your rousing words, only time will tell if that is viewed as a good thing or bad."

Harry shrugged. "Compared to the rest of the magical governments of the world, Britain is still in the dark ages with the majority of the policies in effect. Compared to the rest of the societies of the world, Britain is the only one where blood purity alone determines so much. Hagrid told me a few years ago that there is no such thing as a pureblood any more, and I'd have to agree with him."

Dumbledore nodded and deftly changed topics. "Indeed. I see by Bill's presence you both have come to a decision in regards to my proposal."

Harry glanced over at Bill and gave him the floor. "Harry and I would gladly make a public declaration of the blood feud against The

Lestrangle and Riddle families and declare an alliance between our families as well."

Dumbledore smiled. "Very good, I shall make the necessary preparations and go over the relevant material with you before it is made public. If you don't mind Mr. Weasley, I'd like a moment to discuss something of interest with Harry."

Bill nodded and took his leave for the night back to his apartment with Fleur. Once he told her all about Harry's words of the evening he was sure she'd be more than fired up enough for some more 'English lessons'.

Once Bill had gone Dumbledore stated, "I found it very interesting that a trained Nundu would repel a giant attack in Hogsmeade. In short, I've been finding several other interesting things after a modicum of research. Things like why the school wards inform me of two unknown animagi, and yet won't tell me where to find them. Things like viewing an Auror's memory of the attack and seeing a suspicious green eyed black cat of some sort single-handedly repel an attack. I won't bother suggesting you take the time to register; likewise I won't suggest Ms. Granger do the same. But, please do take all precautions if you find yourself in a similar situation in the future."

Harry merely nodded. He had assumed that Dumbledore would figure it out eventually and didn't feel particularly perturbed to have it happen now.

Dumbledore's eyes became very kindly as he dismissed Harry. "You are a remarkable young man Harry, and I deeply wish I had your observations at my disposal more often. Remember that when we return to Hogwarts my door is always open to you. I still have much about Riddle that I need to show you, and I have some other suspicions that we will deal with then as well."

As Harry turned to leave he couldn't help but shake his head at the notion of a teenager advising the great Albus Dumbledore. He chuckled as he realized it was a world indeed that had gone mad.

A/N: There it is, another chapter. I had planned on taking this through Christmas day, but I'll try to have that out by Christmas proper to keep everything in the holiday mood.

Thanks to all of you that have taken the time to read and review.

Question of the chapter:

What are your thoughts on recent quotes indicating the movie version of Half Blood Prince is more than a little bit of Romantic comedy of sorts? Does it play to the intended audience of the movies, or does it miss the point entirely?

Disclaimer: The characters, settings, and associated minutiae aren't mine. They are however the property of one JKR, and her assorted business partners.

In the immortal words of Freddie Mercury, "the show must go on."

As always thanks to my wonderful beta chem prof.

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Christmas Eve passed quickly as each person in Grimmauld all had personal business to attend to one way or the other. Harry's trip to Gringott's went very much under the radar with the aid of Remus, and Harry was visibly reminded of why the man had been the brains of the Marauders.

There were still murmurs about the strong words Harry had used at the Order meeting from the few members that had stopped by Grimmauld, but with said teenager out of the house nothing came from the grumbling. In fact, Harry didn't return to Grimmauld until late evening, giving him enough time to spend an hour or so with Hermione and her parents before he bade everyone else a good night.

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Dumbledore rubbed at his eyes tiredly as he finished making the requested adjustments to the new Minister's contingency plans should Voldemort attack either Hogwarts or the Ministry directly. He hated to think that the worst would come to pass, but at least Rufus was taking a much more pragmatic approach to the war.

Harry's words, while refreshing, had led to complaints from many of the older Order members via owl or Floo call during the day. Unsurprisingly, the younger members of the group seemed to rally around Harry's words, while the Aurors in the group seemed to accept his words at face value and move on.

It was definitely a sign of the times when the great Albus Dumbledore began to question his own mortality, and decided he needed to

encourage Harry's fledgling leadership in the wizarding world. While Alastor and Minerva could lead in the interim if the worst came to pass, Harry would be the only viable long term replacement in the various positions he currently held. Great power and firm entrenchment to the light side was required to keep the purebloods from running roughshod over the muggleborns at Hogwarts and the Ministry, and Harry was the only one who fit the mold.

Fawkes trilled a melancholy note reflecting his human's morose musings; it appeared that even an immortal creature like a phoenix understood the concept of mortality.

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Harry sighed as he stared into the fireplace Christmas morning; his stomach was currently somewhere in his throat by the feel of things as he turned a ring around in his hands. It wasn't like he was proposing to Hermione, but still; giving a ring to the girl you love is never an easy thing to do.

There would always be that small cynical part of him that would crop up at inopportune times like this, reminding him of the odds of both his and Hermione's survival by the time all of this mess with Riddle was finished. But, even with all of that in mind he knew he needed to keep living and this was just one example of what that meant.

So lost in his musings was he that he didn't hear the soft patter of steps come down the stairs and into the eve of the room. Hermione had Crookshanks in her arms as she stroked the orange ball of fur's head; her hair was rather sleep mussed and as a result was even wilder than normal. She was wearing pajama pants and a hooded sweatshirt she had permanently borrowed from Harry. While Grimmauld had been made far more habitable in the past year or so, it was still rather chilly during even the warmest times of year.

Silently Hermione approached Harry as he continued to sit on the couch and stare into the fire. As carefully as she could she cleared her throat so as not to startle him. After all, it wouldn't do to be stunned by him on Christmas morning of all times.

Of course Harry knew she had been there the moment she reached the eve; even if he couldn't read her thoughts he could tell her magic apart from any other witch alive. It wasn't something he even consciously was aware of for the longest time, but he could feel others' magic if he concentrated enough. Learning Occlumency had revealed many secrets of magic and many truths about his own abilities. Hermione's magic was so...focused compared to almost anyone else he had ever met.

Hermione sat down on the couch, taking care to put her feet in Harry's lap as Crookshanks lounged on her legs. Smiling softly she simply said, "Merry Christmas."

Harry rolled the ring around in his hand once more before he muttered to himself, "I sure hope so." Turning to Hermione, he noticed by her bemused expression that she had heard his words.

Reaching out he grasped one of her hands and held her wrist with the other hand, which was incidentally holding the ring. "I love you."

Hermione blinked before her eyes softened. "I love you too."

Harry couldn't keep the small grin on his face from forming before he slowly coaxed her hand open and ran his fingers over her palm. "Do you ever think about how much things have changed between us in such a short amount of time?" Hermione merely nodded as she was content to let Harry have this rare moment of emotional openness with her and not spoil it with her own words.

Harry released his grasp on her wrist but held her hand open with his hand as he cautiously took the ring and placed it in her suddenly clammy palm. "This is erm, this is a promise ring and my formal request that we enter into a betrothal contract."

Hermione searched his eyes for any sign of hesitation for a long moment before she asked, "You're sure you want this?"

Harry nodded and released her hand, not knowing what to feel at the moment, "Yes erm, I hate all of this stuffy pretentious stuff, but it's required if we want to get engaged someday."

Hermione smiled softly before she grasped the ring in her hand and said, "Well then I suppose we should do this properly. Would you put the ring on me Harry?"

Harry's color immediately began to return as he took the ring with trembling fingers and slid it onto Hermione's hand. Hermione's smile was nearly blinding as Crookshanks just barely managed to abandon his perch before he would have been crushed between his mistress and the messy haired one.

As Hermione's kiss deepened Harry felt himself truly relax for the first time in what felt like forever. Life was good.

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The rest of Christmas went by in a blur of torn wrapping paper, eggnog, and stories told of more peaceful times. Thankfully Voldemort had gone quiet following the attack at Hogsmeade; apparently even he had limits as to the destruction he wanted to produce. The dementors had been quiet, and by whatever deity above allowed it, the new year came without another death attributable to murder or mayhem.

Harry had been trained briefly but intensely in the use of Gryffindor's sword during battle, the sword having enough inherent magic to allow the wielder to cast limited spells through the blade, as well as being sharp enough to cut through stone.

In fact, even Harry and Hermione's official announcement of being betrothed and its eventual placement on the front page of the Prophet hadn't slowed the days at all. The one thing Harry was counting down the days to would be his first appearance before the Wizengamot proper as the heir to a hereditary seat and future member of the body.

While Harry had first learned much about the Ministry and its various bodies from Mr. Weasley, those conversations were too painful to dredge up while still being able to seek out details. Therefore, it was with great reluctance that he approached Sirius about a decidedly serious issue a few days beforehand. It had taken a considerable

amount of time, but in the end he had found Sirius with his head poking out of the icebox in a small anteroom of the main kitchen he had never taken the time to explore before.

"Sirius, I've been looking all over for you." Harry exclaimed.

Sirius' head popped up as he peered over the door to the enchanted icebox. If Harry had taken the time to look closely he would have noticed the lipstick print on his godfather's cheek. "Harry," he began hesitantly, "What can I help you with?"

Harry sighed. "I need to know more about the specifics of the Wizengamot, and I know you've been voting for the Black family for the last few months. Do you have some time to spare right now?"

Sirius squirmed slightly as a pair of warm hands began running up and down his thighs. "Harry, I'm entertaining a friend at the moment, can this wait until the afternoon?"

Harry's face flushed red as a head of blonde hair popped up at this point before it swiveled and light blue eyes regarded him.

Sirius cleared his throat awkwardly. "Harry, this is Evelyn Vance; I believe you've met her older sister Emmeline."

Harry's eyes shifted back and forth for a long moment before he grinned devilishly. "Of course I have." His eyes shifted to Evelyn. "It's a pleasure to meet you Ms. Vance."

Evelyn smiled brightly. "It's nice to meet you too Harry. Sirius has told me so much about you."

Harry grinned. "Well, I'm sad to say he hasn't mentioned you yet, but I'll forgive him this time." Nodding to himself he smirked before he slowly started to back out of the room. "I'll just leave you to your breakfast then."

Sirius suppressed a groan at the look on Harry's face. It was way too close to the look on James' face when he began to plot something.

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Sirius finally found Harry in the library later that day, reading on the couch by the fireplace, hopefully having recovered from the dreadful embarrassment he had inadvertently caused him earlier.

"Harry?"

Harry glanced up from the book he was reading, Rules and Regulations for the Wizengamot. "Hey Paddy, what's up?"

Sirius plopped down next to Harry on the couch and sighed heavily. "Well, Evelyn just went back to her place and I figured I'd explain what you saw this morning before we get into the Wizengamot."

Harry merely shook his head. "You don't need to explain yourself Sirius. You're an adult and if you want to start dating, or even just erm, shagging witches I'm not going to tell you what to do."

Sirius chuckled lightly. "Well, I'm glad to hear that. But, just so you know I am dating Evelyn and we have been dating for about a week and a half now."

Harry nodded as Sirius continued, "So you wanted to talk about the Wizengamot, right?"

"I've read up on the proper means of addressing the body at large and individuals in specific, but how do votes and other administrative things work?" asked Harry.

Sirius grinned wryly. "You know, if you had told me that I was going to be in the Wizengamot when I was your age I would have laughed my arse off."

Harry nodded. "If someone had told me there was magic and I'd be famous six years ago I would have laughed my arse off too."

Sirius scowled as he thought about just who Harry was living with six years earlier, before he sighed, "Well kiddo, the Wizengamot is a pretty slimy place. That's not to say there aren't some good people

there, but usually they don't have much of a voice due to Umbridge, Malfoy, and Fudge."

Harry furrowed his brow, "Fudge?"

Sirius nodded. "Yeah, he has a hereditary seat for something one of his ancestors did in a goblin war. The point is that no one can stand up to the Malfoy bloc of voters. You and your friend Neville will help when you get old enough, but for now it's like trying to wade through treacle to get something productive done."

Harry sighed. "This book indicates that everyone on the body has a single vote. How many voters are there exactly?"

Sirius shrugged. "Well that depends, currently there are 46 members of the entire body that can vote. Twenty five hereditary seats exist, and twenty five seats are appointed by a board of senior Wizengamot members. Four hereditary seats are currently vacant due to situations like yours. You, Neville, and that Zabini boy will claim three of the four available votes, and I think the Goldstein boy in Ravenclaw would claim the other vote through his mother's side."

Harry rubbed at his eyes. "Neville's gran would have been voting before she was killed, wouldn't she?"

Sirius shook his head. "No, it was a pretty common thing for the hereditary seats to be limited to male descendants only. The Potter seat is an exception to that, because your granddad changed the provisions on the seat. But, I'll tell you all about your grandpa Charlus some other time. Was there anything else you wanted to know?"

Harry absently shook his head. "No, that should do for now. Thanks Paddy."

Sirius slowly rose to his feet, suddenly feeling all of his 35 years; on an impulse he ruffled Harry's hair. "Get yourself cleaned up and ready for dinner. No more excuses about you being too busy to eat with your old godfather this time, you hear?" Harry rolled his eyes but grinned and nodded in assent before Sirius left the room to deal with

some more of those damnable memories that always wanted to haunt him.

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Harry had to suppress a sigh at the showing for the Wizengamot meeting, not that a filled press box should have surprised him in retrospect. Dumbledore had led the body through a variety of mindless minutiae, and it was about time for him to make his first public, political statement.

He knew he was going to ruffle some feathers with this announcement, but honestly he might as well use his fame for something worthwhile. Also, if he was going to live in this world for the rest of his life, then he was going to do his best to make it a place worth living in. This was to be the first step towards ending the centuries of blood bigotry and narrow-minded thinking that had plagued this world for far too long.

Dumbledore banged his enchanted gavel, thus ending all discussion on the latest topic before he made to read a note on his podium. "Next item of business has been brought forth to me. The Heads of the houses for Potter and Weasley wish to make a joint announcement. Please remember that Mr. Potter will be a peer by this time next year, so please take the time to pay attention."

It hadn't taken too long to figure out that while Bill was a very cool guy, he wasn't cut out for politics and public speaking. In the end it was decided that Harry would be the one to make the necessary statements and speak for both himself and Bill.

Harry stood and swallowed once in an attempt to combat the nauseous feeling sweeping over him. "Thank you Mr. Dumbledore. Venerated members of the Wizengamot, I come to you today as the last of my line. Four of my line have been murdered in the last twenty years and no satisfaction has been paid for these crimes. Therefore, it is in my capacity as the Head of Clan Potter that I declare a blood feud in a demand for satisfaction against Tom Marvolo Riddle Jr. and those that decide to follow him."

Taking a breath he glanced over at Bill who nodded. "Likewise, Bill Weasley, the de facto head of the Weasley family has declared a blood feud against the Lestrangle family. I open the floor to any objections that might be made so that I might address them as is my right."

This is where things would get interesting according to Dumbledore. Having Malfoy, Fudge, and Umbridge as members of the body tended to mean as much.

Sure enough Umbridge stood. "Permission to speak Chief Warlock."

Dumbledore merely nodded as Umbridge turned her beady eyes towards Harry. "Mr. Potter, you wish to declare blood feud on the Riddle family is it?"

Harry nodded as she continued, "Very well, if you could perhaps show proof that Mr. Riddle was guilty of these charges perhaps we could better understand your request."

"Madam Umbridge, Tom Marvolo Riddle is an anagram for 'I am Lord Voldemort'. Would you care for me to explain further?" Gasps ran through the crowd at the casual mention of the dark lord.

Umbridge narrowed her eyes. "I am unaware of any pureblood families named Riddle, Mr. Potter. Surely you jest in telling us the dark lord is not a pureblood."

Harry arched his eyebrow. "Perhaps a little story would suffice in quenching your thirst for knowledge Madam."

Umbridge glanced over to Malfoy who nodded shortly, but if the pursed lips and narrowed eyes on the Malfoy scion were any indication he wasn't pleased with this turn of events.

Harry half bowed and began, "In the 1920's a magical family lived outside of Little Hangleton. They were known as the Gaunt family, and they claimed ancestry from Salazar Slytherin. There was a father, a son, and a timid daughter that lived together and they despised the muggles they were forced to live near. Unfortunately, as a byproduct

of this family's desire to remain purebloods at all costs, a certain amount of genetic deformity had taken place. This was particularly problematic for the youngest, the daughter named Merope Gaunt. In the end her father understood that she would never attract a proper pureblood suitor and he treated her with cruelty as a result of this. Over time Merope despaired that she would never leave the house of her father and began to seek out a suitor that would take her away from her own personal hell."

Harry glanced around; the entire body was silent and listening intently. A quick glance to Dumbledore showed the aging wizard with something akin to a smirk on his face as he watched his protégé silence a group of witches and wizards many times his elders.

"In the end she became besotted with an attractive and wealthy young muggle in the village named Tom Riddle. Aware that she could never attract the man on her own merits she ensnared him with the application of a love potion. Of course her father and brother immediately disowned Merope, and she was burdened with the knowledge that the only person she still had in the world was one under the effects of an enchantment. As luck would have it, Merope became pregnant and her belief that her muggle husband would not abandon her led her to discontinue the use of the potion."

Harry smiled as a few of the members began to squirm in their seats. "Tom Riddle promptly abandoned Merope and divorced her, leaving the pregnant and nearly penniless witch homeless and without anyone to turn to. In the end she died in childbirth and placed her child up for adoption, naming the boy Tom Marvolo Riddle after the muggle she loved and her father Marvolo Gaunt."

Harry sighed. "The young Tom Riddle had a difficult childhood at a muggle orphanage before he discovered that he was a wizard when Albus Dumbledore gave him his Hogwarts acceptance letter when he turned 11. A phenomenal student at Hogwarts, Tom Riddle was a prefect and head boy, having also been wrongly honored for ending the threat of the Chamber of Secrets. After he left Hogwarts he delved deeply into the dark arts, traveling the world and gaining power through various dark rituals. Nearly twenty years passed

before he reemerged as the dark wizard known as Lord Voldemort. History clearly shows that this creature killed both of my paternal grandparents and my parents through his reign of terror. By this do I make my rightful claim to a blood feud and the protections it affords me by the law."

Lucius Malfoy stood next, and he completely bypassed typical protocol and drawled, "How exactly are we to know this isn't a clever fabrication of facts perpetrated by Mr. Potter in an attempt to circumvent the law?"

Murmurs rose throughout the crowd and Harry raised his hand begging for silence. "If someone can disprove my claims now, or at any point in the future with an abundance of evidence deemed credible by this venerable body under the effects of Veritaserum, I will then drop my claim and not pursue it any further under the protection of law."

Harry hastened to add, "Bill Weasley's claim is much more straightforward, and forensic evidence does prove that Bellatrix Lestrange was the responsible party for Arthur Weasley's unfortunate death."

Dumbledore gazed over the crowd and he nodded to himself once. "Mr. Potter's claim has met all challenges thus far, and his concessions do meet the legal requirements to make such a proclamation. Mr. Weasley's claim also appears to meet the requirements. Are there any further challenges to these two demands for satisfaction?"

Harry's words had stunned many of those in the Wizengamot, and he had done so with an issue which would normally cause some dispute amongst the members. Due to the sheer inconceivability of the story, and the fact that it was most likely true, the assembled body for once remained silent on an issue.

No one spoke up and Dumbledore banged his gavel, making the motion a legally binding declaration. "So mote it be."

Harry released a deep breath as he stepped down from the podium and quickly left the main chambers with Bill hot on his heels. Once clear of the chambers Bill exclaimed, "Blood hell Harry, you had them all eating out of your hands. How did you know all of that about Voldemort anyways?"

Harry shrugged. "I learned some of it in the Chamber of Secrets, and the rest of it was directly from memories in Professor Dumbledore's pensieve. Useful things those pensieves are."

Bill merely nodded as they walked into the atrium and left via the Floo connections for an Order safe house before the pair then Flooed to Grimmauld Place, for a stiff drink of some sort. Their first appearance before the Wizengamot had gone off without too much trouble.

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Amelia Bones had a bit of a quandary on her hands; she had been amongst those that investigated whom Lord Voldemort might have been before he took on his dark lord persona. Years of painstaking research hadn't turned up anything as detailed as what Harry Potter had revealed, and while there had been rumors of Dumbledore knowing the dark lord's true identity she had never expected them to be true. After all, what could the headmaster of Hogwarts know, that an experienced investigative auror could not uncover?

Mere hours following the chaos of Harry Potter's first Wizengamot address, she had sent an owl off requesting a private audience with the young man for further elaboration on his earlier words regarding Riddle. She had even taken the socially prudent route and invited his betrothed as well. While she was like many women hoping their daughters or nieces would be in Ms. Granger's shoes some day, she harbored the impressive young woman no ill will.

It had come as no big surprise when an owl came back with an acceptance for the next day, and thanking her for inviting Ms. Granger as well. Amelia had been surprised by that little mention; it appeared that Mr. Potter wasn't exactly the brash young man that the Wizengamot had seen yesterday after all.

A buzz on her desk indicated her 3:00 appointment had just arrived, and with a flick of her wand Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were ushered in. After the customary offer of a drink she got right down to business, "A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance Mr. Potter and Ms, Granger."

Harry smiled and glanced over to Hermione, "Thank you Madam Bones."

Hermione added, "I appreciated your thoughtfulness in allowing me to come as well."

Amelia smiled, it was refreshing to meet respectful young people, "It's only proper Ms. Granger, and you'll find that short of the Wizengamot not a single place that Mr. Potter is allowed will be denied to his betrothed."

Harry nodded, "I'd prefer if you call me Harry, Madam Bones. I have no need for formality today; I think I had my fill of that for the month yesterday."

Amelia laughed, "Yes, you stirred up quite the hornet's nest yesterday, and in fact that was what I requested your audience for."

Harry nodded and casually motioned his hand beckoning her to continue, "You see Harry, I spent ten years following the initial emergence of Lord Voldemort trying to discover what his true identity was. I'm simply amazed that you would have access to such information."

Harry nodded, "May I speak candidly Madam Bones?"

Amelia nodded, "I'd prefer it Harry."

Harry smiled slowly, "In my second year, when the heir of Slytherin had made the appearance during the series of attacks, I discovered Voldemort's true identity. While I have no evidence of this claim, Lucius Malfoy placed an old school relic of his master's in a young witch's cauldron filled with school books.

This was no normal relic, in fact it was an enchanted diary that was able to possess and control the witch after a long struggle. The heir of Slytherin was indeed freed upon the castle, but he was not present in body, but through his vengeful spirit inhabiting a plain black diary."

Harry took a swallow from the small glass of water before he continued, "Hermione here was the one who actually broke the mystery right before she was petrified. The heir of Slytherin was commanding a basilisk to travel through the pipes of the school to attack students it came across when it was free. Ron Weasley and I discovered shortly after learning the identity of the monster that his sister had been taken down into the chamber of secrets."

Amelia nodded as a dictation quill continued to take down Harry's words, "We've been informed of as much by your headmaster, but please continue."

"Ron and I confronted Lockhart about helping us and he attempted to memory charm us. Fortunately he was a worthless excuse for a wizard, and two second years managed to get the drop on him and force him to join us. Upon finding the entrance of the chamber we ventured down, deep under the school in a desperate attempt to save Ginny.

Lockhart managed to grab Ron's wand, and once again he attempted to memory charm the both of us in a bid to save his cowardly hide. What he wasn't aware of, was that Ron's wand had been broken and malfunctioning for most of the year. The spell backfired and he memory charmed himself, also managing to cause a cave-in which separated Ron from me."

Amelia arched her eyebrow; this was moving into territory that she was unfamiliar with from Dumbledore's initial report of the incident.

Hermione broke in at this point, "Madam Bones, we'd prefer if the remainder of this conversation is kept a secret that you alone are aware of. Feel free to add pertinent details in your report, but much of this needs to remain confidential for reasons which Professor Dumbledore assured us he would explain to you."

Amelia nodded as she flicked her wand stopping the dictation quill and erasing the last set of statements. "Very well, that is an acceptable request Ms. Granger."

Hermione nodded as Harry continued, "I managed to enter the main chamber to find Ginny Weasley near death on the ground next to the little black diary of T.M Riddle. To my surprise a living avatar of Tom Riddle appeared as though from thin air and taunted me about Ginny's death, and then he explained that he was the 16-year-old avatar of Lord Voldemort. Using his ability to speak to snakes he summoned the basilisk and with a considerable amount of luck I managed to best it using Gryffindor's sword."

Harry turned to Hermione and grinned, "We should probably harvest the corpse for potions ingredients now that I think about it. I imagine a 1000 year old basilisk skin vest and pants would work rather nicely."

Amelia cleared her throat pointedly and Harry grinned sheepishly, "Right, well Professor Dumbledore's phoenix managed to heal my wounds and flew all of us out of the chamber. Once I had Voldemort's real name I learned a bit more, and Professor Dumbledore supplied me with memories detailing Merope Gaunt's sad story."

Amelia made a few notations on the piece of paper before she said, "While that is indeed an incredible story which many would be able to write quite the story from, I think it shall suffice for my own personal curiosities."

Hermione glanced at Harry, his eyes had gone distant in remembrance of his ordeal down in the chamber and she asked, "Was there anything else you would like to know Madam Bones?"

Amelia removed her monocle and polished on her vest before she replied, "While I would request you contact my department should you find yourself in an abundant surplus of that basilisk hide, I think I have gotten the answers I sought."

Hermione sighed in relief as she tugged on Harry's hand pulling him out of his seat, he graced her with a grateful smile before she turned to Madam Bones, "It was a pleasure Madam Bones."

Amelia graced Hermione with a warm smile, "I do believe the pleasure was all mine young lady, but I thank you nonetheless."

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The Hogwarts Express departed from King's Cross without a whisper of trouble from Voldemort or his forces, but that's not to say there weren't distractions of another kind. Various press agencies from around the magical world were there trying to get some sort of word from either Harry Potter or Hermione Granger on a variety of topics.

Due to some creative contingencies devised by Moody, the aforementioned pair managed to sneak past detection via the polyjuiced forms of two teenage muggles found near Grimmauld Place. Hedwig and Crookshanks hadn't appreciated having their colors changed for any amount of time, but considering the compensation, in the form of treats, they didn't put up nearly as much fuss as they could have.

It was the first time Harry had ever gone anywhere during Christmas break since he had started at Hogwarts, so this was the first time he had ridden the Express back to school. Thus, he had been pleasantly surprised when Hermione informed him that Prefects did not have to take their customary rounds.

The pair settled into a compartment as Hermione sent off her patronus as a signal for the Order members to scatter and disperse.

Harry had to admit that Hermione as a pretty blonde did interest him in a few ways so he asked, "So, do blondes really have more fun?"

Hermione gave Harry a gimlet eye. "I don't know, but you as a redhead is doing nothing for me."

Harry chuckled in response. "Good thing I'm not a Weasley then."

Hermione mumbled something along the lines of "You got that right", but he didn't catch the exact words and was soon contented as he began to count down the minutes until the polyjuice potion wore off.

Once their doses had worn off the pair took care to return their familiars to their original forms before Hermione sent Crookshanks off to retrieve any of their friends that wanted to join them. They were enjoying the peaceful moment, merely snuggled together on the bench listening to the other breathe when Ron burst through the door.

"Bloody hell you two, I was going bonkers thinking something had happened to you," Ron exclaimed in his typical bombastic fashion.

Harry chuckled as Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron, mate we had to figure out a way to get around the press. I'm sure you had to deal with them to a lesser extent, didn't you?"

Ron sighed and was about to answer when Neville and Luna Lovegood piled into the compartment. Ron's face went pink as Luna stared at him unabashedly for an awkward moment before she turned to Harry and Hermione. "Hello Potters, I heard that a sprig of Holly can keep the fizzwhingers away."

Harry grinned and pulled out his wand. "I've got my sprig of Holly right here."

Luna nodded, apparently appeased, as she plopped down on the opposite bench and produced a copy of the Quibbler from somewhere on her person.

Neville smiled indulgently at Luna before he greeted his friends, "Congratulations you two. Harry, bloody well done at the Wizengamot, it's been all my gran can talk about since you made your announcement. Apparently she wants to make a similar proclamation on my parents' behalf against that crazy bitch and Barty Crouch Jr."

Hermione looked like she wanted to chastise Neville for his language, but decided against the virtue of such a move considering what the monsters had done to his parents.

Harry furrowed his brow. "Where's Ginny at?"

Ron made a disgusted face. "Off with her new boyfriend I suspect. Michael Corner, if you can believe it."

Hermione frowned. "Michael Corner has a bit of a reputation amongst the girls. Do you think I should talk to Ginny about it?"

Harry opened his mouth, but it was Luna that spoke. "Maybe she feels like she deserves to be used. Stilted Ginger Hoppers often have that effect."

Harry digested Luna's words for a moment. "Why would she feel like she deserves to be used?"

Luna glanced up from her Quibbler with a bemused expression. "Well it's not like she is going to be used by the boy she wants to now, is it?"

Hermione sighed heavily and nodded before she grasped Harry's shoulder in an entreaty to let it go. "Harry, just let it be."

Ron nodded. "I talked to her mate, she sent one of those Bat Bogies at me, and told me to mind my own business. I'll talk to the twins later; maybe they'll have some ideas." Ron hesitated for a moment before he added, "Ginny...she's changed since Dad died. She's probably changed more than the rest of us combined. The last time I remember her being so moody is when she had that diary."

Harry sighed heavily before finally nodding his acquiescence, sometimes the only thing to do was the thing we least wanted to.

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As the train pulled into Hogsmeade station the familiar presence of Hagrid beckoned the students to the carriages towards the castle. A few Aurors were stationed around the carriages forming a perimeter of sorts as the students were hustled aboard.

Hermione frowned. "It's sad that I'm getting used to Aurors at every turn when I go outside now."

Neville nodded. "My gran always used to say V-Voldemort always attacked from the shadows last time. This time he's doing everything out in the open."

Luna airily added, "Sometimes the best place to hide your true intentions is in plain sight. That's what Snorkacks are famous for, after all."

Harry eyed Luna appraisingly. "I think you might be on to something there Luna. Voldemort probably is making all of these public attacks to cover something else up."

Hagrid took advantage of the apparent lull in the conversation to lumber over to the group and make his presence known with a none-too-subtle clearing of his throat.

Harry arched his eyebrow. "What can we help you with Hagrid?"

"'Arry, do yah remember about that thing I had promised to show yah in the forest?" Hagrid spoke quietly, at least quietly for him.

Harry took Hagrid's tone for what it was an indirect request to speak in private. Stepping away from his friends he gestured his hand forming a simple privacy charm. "I had thought you'd forgotten about that Hagrid."

Hagrid's beard twitched as he grinned. "Won't be no forgettin this 'Arry, trust me on that."

Harry merely nodded as Hagrid clapped his shoulder. "I reckon yer gonna be right surprised when I show yer it. Meet me outside meh hut tomorrah night, and yeh can bring 'ermione and Ron if yer want to."

Harry blinked once before a gentle push from Hagrid had him stumbling backwards towards his friends as they began to board their carriage.

After he helped Hermione aboard Harry hopped up to sit next to her before she spoke out of the side of her mouth. "What did Hagrid want, Harry?"

Harry grinned slightly. "Oh he just wants to show us something in the Forbidden Forest. I'm sure it's some creature that would kill as soon as it would kiss us."

Judging by the look in Hermione's eyes, she was thinking that the likelihood that any of Hagrid's beasties wanting a kiss was rather smaller than the likelihood it would kill them.

Deciding a change of topic would be best at this point Harry moved on to one he was sure Ron would be interested in. "So, what do you fancy they'll be serving for dinner?"

Ron's eyes went dreamy. "Oh, I hope they do some chicken. Treacle sounds good also."

Everyone in the carriage laughed at Ron's blissful expression. At least some things never changed.

A/N: Sorry about the delay in posting this one, I had written about half of it when the file was 'corrupted'. Things will start gaining some speed now that Riddle has been exposed publicly, and in a way that can't easily be refuted.

I imagine it will be 6-7 more chapters before the apex of this year comes to the fore, so I hope you can all hang with me until then. Thanks for all of the reviews, and thanks for reading.

Question of the chapter:

There have been rumors that Deathly Hallows may be split into two movies, for 'artistic' reasons? What are your thoughts on this idea?

Disclaimer: It's JKR's universe of characters, settings, and the like. The plot is already fallen from the canon path, and it will only continue to diverge from here.

As always thanks for the polish of the chapter goes to my wonderful beta chem prof

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Professor Snape strode into the Potions classroom looking even more agitated than normal as he flicked his wand and the directions for the calming draught appeared on the board.

In a clipped tone he simply said, "Due to the inevitable emotional collapse of various students during the OWL and NEWT examinations, Madam Pomfrey needs to keep her stocks full with this draught. Those students that manage medical grade work will receive extra credit for the assignment. Pair off, because the quantities on the board call for a double dosage and will need due diligence to complete."

Harry arched his eyebrow as he turned to Hermione and she rolled her eyes. "You go get the ingredients we don't already have, and I'll prepare the cauldron and fire."

Harry quickly scampered over to the ingredients cabinet, grabbing some of the dilute mandrake root before he hazarded a glance around the room, immediately noticing Snape as he rubbed on his left forearm. Frowning, he continued to scan the room and the only other face looking downtrodden was Draco Malfoy. Harry allowed these observations to sink into his head for a moment before he came to the inescapable conclusion that Voldemort was busy doing something.

Returning to the desk he casually stated, "Snape's forearm seems to be bothering him quite a bit, doesn't it?"

Hermione merely nodded, having observed as much and its inescapable conclusion. "Ok, I've already added the ashwinder eggs and now you need to add the nettle leaves. Then I'll stir it for fifteen

minutes, alternating clockwise and counterclockwise stirring motions. When it turns a lavender color then you add the mandrake root."

Harry ran a hand through his hair and nodded. The calming draught was on the easy end of potions they might have to make for their OWL practical, but the stirring was very specific on this potion for a reason.

Hermione diligently kept her stirring up as she commented, "I doubt we'll know what Riddle wants until it actually happens Harry."

Harry nodded glumly. "I know, but it just seems so wrong to be here learning about potions when Riddle is planning to kill people."

Hermione's voice was soft and warm as she replied, "I know it seems that way Harry, and you're right it is wrong. But, just because you know he is going to do something, it doesn't mean you can do something about it."

"This has to end, before we destroy ourselves dealing with Riddle," Harry stated softly.

Hermione sighed, "Thankfully the rest of the magical world isn't so antiquated. I wouldn't be completely averse to moving to Australia, Canada or America after all of this is over, and keeping a seasonal home here so we can visit whenever we want."

Harry smiled slightly at the change of topic. "You've thought about this, have you?"

Hermione smiled. "Of course I have Harry; after all thinking is what I do best."

Harry arched his eyebrow. "I don't know, you were pretty good at doing something else at Christmas."

Hermione blushed brightly and made a point to avoid contact with Harry. "Anyways, think about how horrid it would be dealing with the media like they were at the station today. When you beat Riddle, it

will only get worse for a while. I mean look at the crowds that Lockhart attracted, and he was a complete fraud."

Harry conceded the point with a shrug of his shoulders as Hermione continued to stir the potion in her typical clinical manner. Finally she spoke again. "You know, we do have career counseling coming up in February. Then we have to continue our OWL review, and I already know that Ron will start bugging me about copying my notes."

Harry chuckled and put the mandrake roots in as the potion turned the appropriate lavender color as Hermione had indicated. The potion bubbled for a moment as Hermione methodically changed the intensity of the flame before she commenced stirring again, "Now I just need to alternate five minute segments of stirring and sitting for the next thirty minutes and the potion should be finished."

Hermione sighed and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "I wonder what the election of Minister Scrimgeour will mean for Professor Umbridge and how she teaches."

Harry looked down at his watch and grimaced. "This is just great, an hour listening to Trelawney predicting my death followed by the new and improved Umbridge."

Hermione smirked at Harry but refrained from saying anything; she couldn't berate him too much considering he was still thinking of taking the OWL exam for Arithmancy as an independent study. If he could manage a good grade in a class he wasn't even taking, the divination grade would be mitigated on his transcript.

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After a typically dreary Divination class, the food at lunch didn't taste very good in anticipation of Umbridge in the defense classroom.

Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville all shuffled into the classroom five minutes before class was to begin. The Slytherins had not yet arrived and the other Gryffindors would wait until the last minute as well.

The four decided to take two tables in the middle of the room and after they sat down Ron groaned, "This is going to be horrible, I can already tell. How much do you want to bet Umbridge will be back to her old tricks when she gets here?"

Harry rolled his eyes at Ron before waving his wand idly and putting privacy charms into effect. "Brilliant Ron, did you ever think she might have listening charms up before class to try and catch someone saying something like that?"

Ron paled as Hermione laughed quietly. "Oh honestly Harry, I'm sure that's probably the nicest thing someone has said about her this year in this classroom."

Harry grinned at the thought and waved his hand, canceling the charms absently as others began to slowly file into the class. Malfoy sat in the back next to Blaise of all people, and for once the Slytherins looked as uncertain about what to expect from Umbridge as the Gryffindors present.

Sure enough Umbridge sauntered down the stairs from her office; surprisingly enough she was dressed in some bizarre outfit which was a mix between a dueling outfit and a pink cupcake.

Harry's eyes widened as he mumbled, "She looks like a pink nightmare."

Hermione covered her laugh with a cough as Umbridge began her spiel, ignoring the titters from throughout the class. "Today class, we are going to learn how to properly defend ourselves through practical experience. I will pair you off based upon skill level as evidenced in your coursework. I do not want to see anything more lethal than blasting, cutting or piercing hexes. Even then, you should only aim for the legs and nothing above it. If you aren't an accurate spell caster then I suggest you stick with a stunning spell and the disarming hex."

Most of the class was actually interested in what Umbridge was saying for once, and she appeared more unsettled by that than anything else. "When I call your names, pair off and line up for your

turn." Umbridge waved her wand and a standard dueling platform flashed into existence along the far wall of the room.

Harry shared an interested look with Hermione before they both turned their gazes back up to Umbridge as she began to read off her list, "Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter."

Harry sighed and rose to his feet, going over to the dueling stage as he kept his ear open for which person Hermione would be paired against. "Hermione Granger, and Daphne Greengrass." Nodding to himself he couldn't disagree with Umbridge's pairing, Daphne had a lot of talent and she had been improving steadily since the defense study group had been launched.

As the pairings were read off, it didn't escape Harry's notice that the houses were divided right down the middle with a Gryffindor facing a Slytherin every time.

Umbridge walked over to the group with a clipboard in hand as she stated in an officious tone, "When I call off your pairing I want you to get on the dueling stage. Remember the rules as I indicated them, the magic of the dueling stage will prevent any spells from hitting spectators so the rest of you pay attention to what your classmates are doing. Dueling for competitive sport is a potential career for any witch or wizard with excellent reflexes, and a grasp of offensive and defensive spells."

Hermione raised her hand and Umbridge nodded to her. "Professor Umbridge, isn't Professor Flitwick a former dueling champion?"

Umbridge nodded. "He was the champion of the All England dueling competition many years ago Ms. Granger." Scanning the room she nodded once to herself. "Well, why don't we start with Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy? I've heard that you two put on quite a show as second years. Let's see how much you've improved since then."

Harry walked onto the stage and felt the tingle of a protective ward as he took his spot on one end of the platform. He honestly didn't know what to expect from Malfoy any more. It had been a poorly kept secret that Draco had surged to near the top in all of his classes this

year and he hadn't tormented Harry or his friends at all. Who knew what kinds of magic he had time to learn during the summers, safely protected from Ministry magic detectors inside the wards of Malfoy Manor.

Almost instinctively Harry shifted into his own unique dueling position, the one he had taken over the break while working with Gryffindor's sword. Harry's exploits the prior year in Moody's dueling seminars were near legendary and many took note of his foot position.

Draco stood at the other end of the platform, his stance a traditional dueling one and without the arrogant swagger he had possessed as a second year.

Umbridge nodded and stated, "At the count of three the duel will begin. Standard dueling procedure states that more than two consecutive attacks from one dueler will result in being penalized. The other limitations have already been discussed, so I expect you gentleman to respect them. One, two, three!"

Draco quickly snapped off two spells, "Relashio, Expelliarmus."

Harry dodged the first spell and allowed the disarming hex to hit him, seemingly shrugging its affects off with a negligent shrug of his shoulders. Most in the class blinked at the display, and Umbridge in particular was gazing at Harry with very wide eyes.

Harry snapped his feet together and pointed his wand higher as he incanted, "Expelliarmus." Malfoy immediately cast a shield and Harry cast another spell in response aiming at Malfoy's legs, "Abrumpo."

Most in the class recognized the spell as the blasting charm Moody had attempted to teach in the dueling seminar.

The first spell was absorbed by Malfoy's simple Protego shield and they winced as Harry's second spell was only partially absorbed by the shield before it painfully slammed into his knees. The audible crack signified the spell had still served its purpose.

Malfoy grunted in pain as he fell down on the stage and he spoke through clenched teeth, "I concede the match."

Harry nodded and with a flick of his wand he began to levitate the Malfoy heir and simply said, "I'll take him to the hospital wing Professor."

Umbridge nodded, somewhat shaken. Draco's performance really was a good one, but Harry certainly outclassed him with his abilities. She was painfully reminded of what she had done to Potter's betrothed earlier in the year, and suddenly she wished she hadn't for now obvious reasons. She wasn't naïve enough to think that she would beat the other wizard on the stage either, as the Malfoy heir certainly had his share of fine tutors during the summers.

In most Ministry circles Potter was viewed as an impetuous young celebrity with more fans than actual ability. Of course it should have been a giveaway that the one group not in agreement was the Auror squads, but when did anyone listen to Aurors?

Pansy Parkinson broke her from her musings as she queried, "Professor, are we going to continue?"

Umbridge looked down at her clipboard for a moment and replied, "Of course, Ms. Parkinson I was just gathering my thoughts. Ms. Granger and Ms. Greengrass next please."

As the two witches stepped onto the stage, Umbridge's mind whirled with the possibilities that Potter was worth all of the hype after all.

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Silence reigned throughout the halls as Harry Potter levitated Draco Malfoy effortlessly through the corridors of Hogwarts. As always, things that should remain unknown for some time were somehow percolating throughout the castle at remarkable speed.

Albus Dumbledore appeared around the corner leading into the hospital wing and he spotted the pair somewhat bemusedly. "Mr.

Potter, Mr. Malfoy is there something you would like to share with me?"

Harry shrugged as he continued walking, passing Dumbledore with his cargo, "We were dueling in Defense, and I sent a blasting hex at him and his shield only partially absorbed it."

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully as he followed Harry into the wing. "Very well Mr. Potter. If you don't mind, I believe I have something I'd like to share with you at your soonest convenience. I believe you already know the password to get into my office."

Harry furrowed his brow as Dumbledore shuffled out of the wing. Gently he sat Draco down on the nearest bed and grinned as Madam Pomfrey began to fuss over him despite his feeble protests. Harry's grin wasn't malicious in the slightest, but he couldn't help but think that it was nice to see it done to someone else for a change.

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Harry entered Dumbledore's office later that night, honestly curious about what Dumbledore might want this time. The lessons on Riddle had apparently ended before the holidays; their purpose seemed rather evident now after all.

"Hello Professor. I hope you don't mind, but I did promise to meet Hagrid later this evening," Harry greeted.

Dumbledore's face was an odd contradiction for once as he managed a small smile in acknowledgement. "Harry, thank you for coming at such short notice." Harry took his usual seat without being prompted; he wanted to get right down to business tonight because it had already been a long day and it was only going to get longer.

Dumbledore noted this and simply began, "While it may come as a surprise to you, I did not show you the memories of Tom Riddle and the Gaunts solely for the reason you may have first expected." Tenting his finger he leaned forward. "Tell me Harry, have you ever heard of a horcrux in your varied readings?"

Something tickled in his mind distantly at the word, but he recalled nothing and replied, "Not that I can remember sir. But, the word does seem familiar."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very well, then perhaps a bit of explanation is in order. Horcrux is the word used to describe a piece of soul, sheared away due to a ritual marked by a cold blooded murder. Typically the piece of soul is placed in a receptacle, and the host receptacle is referred to as the horcrux. For our purposes, we shall assume the same terminology."

Harry's eyes showed he was quickly puzzling this out before he stated, "So Voldemort used a Horcrux then, that's how he survived that night."

Dumbledore nodded gravely. "I've spent many years attempting to discover Tom's method of escaping the clutches of death that night Harry, and while the use of a horcrux had been an option I had considered, it wasn't one I had any proof supporting. That is, until a certain diary was brought inside the castle and you managed to dispatch of it by use of a basilisk fang. It was then that I realized the lengths that Tom went to, to ensure his immortality."

Harry shrugged. "Well, the diary is gone now so I guess he's mortal again."

Dumbledore frowned imperceptibly. "If only it was such Harry. I have reason to believe Tom made several Horcruxes. And the past two and a half years I have been searching in vain for some clue of their location or quantity. While I believe I have discovered the identity of four possible objects, I haven't a clue as to their location."

Harry nodded and motioned for Dumbledore to continue. "They are Hufflepuff's cup, the Gaunt family ring, Slytherin's locket, and Nagini."

Harry puzzled this for a moment before he commented, "So Founders' objects then? But, I'm curious how would a horcrux work with something like Nagini? I would assume it would possess the snake if it was part of her. I mean Ginny was possessed for periods of time and it wasn't even a part of her."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very astute Harry, Nagini is indeed open to possession at any time that Tom would wish it. But, this is due to her lack of a soul of her own more than it is due to the nature of the horcrux."

Harry swallowed thickly before he asked, "So, what about my scar then? I mean there has to be some reason I could see through Nagini's eyes in my dreams back before my fourth year. The visions I've seen, and my ability to sense his emotions would be explained also, wouldn't they."

Dumbledore looked very grave as he replied. "It is indeed a possibility Harry."

Harry narrowed his eyes as he looked at the headmaster. "Surely you know a spell to determine it one way or the other."

Dumbledore nodded and pulled his wand out. "Animus Invenio."

Harry's scar burned for a split second before a green mist seemingly drifted out from it, and he faintly heard his mother's pleading to spare him. It was a familiar memory, one that he seemingly shouldn't even have unless it was indeed Voldemort's memory.

Harry felt a similar crushing weight as he had when Dumbledore had told him of the prophecy, but that was banished after a moment, because he now knew that self pity wouldn't solve anything. Gathering his thoughts he remained silent for several long moments. Dumbledore was observing his reactions closely.

Harry quietly asked, "So, when did you plan on revealing this bit of information to me?"

Dumbledore opted for the full unvarnished truth for once. "It wasn't something I ever planned on telling you. The reasons for this changed after the conclusion of the Tri-Wizard tournament and Tom's return to corporal form. Initially, I hadn't wanted to burden you with the knowledge that your own death would be required to defeat Tom.

After the ritual in which Tom used your blood to bypass your mother's protections however, he created another path for you. A path which would permit your own survival as an end result, should it come to pass. A scenario which I would do everything to ensure comes to fruition."

Harry arched his eyebrow. "What would this other path be?"

Dumbledore winced. "It would require Tom, and Tom alone to hit you with a killing curse. The blood connection that is now shared between you bypasses the primary defenses of the horcrux. Therefore he would destroy the horcrux embedded within your scar, and you would be purged of the soul piece."

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "If I've followed you to this point, it would tend to reason that the piece of soul in my scar could instead be transferred to an inanimate object if I found the proper ritual."

Dumbledore nodded, "It is a possibility, but one that I have yet to find a solution for." Harry sat in silence for another couple of minutes. Dumbledore outwardly remained calm, though inside he was beginning to get nervous at Harry's reaction.

Harry finally shook his head sadly. "How can you rationalize keeping information from me that would mean my death? Do you have such little faith in what decision I would make if it came down to it? Most of your mistakes come from this strange little personality quirk of yours to believe the worst of people who deserve better, and the best of people that don't."

Dumbledore's eyes dimmed at Harry's words. "I've never claimed to be a perfect person Harry, and often times I wonder why I chose the path in life I have. I could have been a world renowned researcher in all branches of magic, and discovered new spells that would have revolutionized magic. Instead I have settled for a short alchemic apprenticeship with Nicholas Flamel, as I've battled against dark forces for the balance of my adult life. There are many days when my heart yearns for nothing more than such a simple life."

Dumbledore removed his glasses and regarded Harry completely honestly as he continued, "But, events in my past have blinded me to certain realities others seem to see that I do not. I've found that as I gained influence that every decision I make seems to adversely affect people. What I endeavor to do, is to place burdens on the shoulders of those who can carry them, and to relieve the burdens of those people who can not."

Fawkes trilled a soothing note of phoenix song at this point, and it seemed to have the proper effect on the pair of powerful wizards in his presence. In a strange reversal of roles Harry was the one peering over the top of his stylish glasses. "Well, then for your sake I hope you can seek forgiveness from those that carry the loads that others are unwilling to."

Dumbledore swallowed the lump in his throat and he quietly asked, "Do I have your forgiveness Harry?"

Harry slowly rose from his seat and regarded his mentor evenly. "I'd say actions matter a lot more than words between us Professor. Actions have always mattered more to me than words, I would have thought you'd know that by now. I think you'll know when you've made good on my account."

With no sense of urgency Harry walked out of Dumbledore's office in pursuit of Hermione; he had a meeting with Hagrid in less than an hour.

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As luck would have it, Harry ran into Hermione just outside of the Great Hall, apparently she was on her way to visit Winky down in the kitchens. He was surprised in just how calm he felt at the moment considering he had just been informed he had a bit of Voldemort's soul floating about in his forehead.

"So, do you know what Hagrid wants to show us?" Hermione questioned with just a hint of nerves in her voice.

Harry's lips quirked, "Well, not exactly but I imagine lethal and cuddly will be the word of the day."

Hermione snorted. "Lethal and cuddly?"

Harry shrugged and gave her an impish grin. "Well, cuddly by Hagrid's standards anyways."

Hermione rolled her eyes as they walked out onto the grounds towards Hagrid's hut. There had been a bit of an early thaw, and the snow was scattered about the field.

The duo was approaching the cabin when Luna Lovegood of all people appeared from thin air next to them, "Oh hello, are you going to see the Thestrals like me?"

Hermione regarded the odd girl with a small smile. "Hello Luna, no actually we are going down to talk to Hagrid."

Luna nodded knowingly. "I like Hagrid, but he has Lispng Hackeysacks in his beard. Someone should really tell him. I've tried but no one listens to me, not even Ronald." She finished in a sad tone of voice. Neither knew how to respond the blonde girl and they watched as she floated away, heading towards the Thestral stables.

A single knock on Hagrid's door was all it took as their half giant friend greeted them brightly, "'Ey there you two. Looks like yer properly bundled up, we've got a 'ittle bit of a walk to go 'ere yet."

The trio entered the forest as the sun was beginning to set; thankfully the moon was already in the sky prepared to keep them out of the dark. The Forbidden Forest was not a pleasant place to be without any light.

Through various twists and turns they went deeper and deeper into the forest before they came upon a clearing. Although, this clearing looked to be more of the sort that came from a great deal of destruction as opposed to something nature had a hand in.

Hagrid glanced around for a moment as he held up his lantern. "I'll be righ' back, you two stay right here and you'll be alrigh'."

Hagrid trotted further into the clearing, the ground trembling as he went. Harry smiled wryly and turned to Hermione, who was looking a bit pale. "So, always exciting dealing with Hagrid, isn't it?"

Hermione tried to glare. "I'm glad this amuses you so much."

Harry chuckled. "I've been in the nest of a King Acromantula in this forest Hermione, after that not much else can compare."

Hermione had to grin a little in thought. "So I bet Ron was terrified, wasn't he?"

Harry chuckled. "Oh man, I'm pretty sure he needed a change of knickers after that. Of course, that wasn't a terribly good year for seeing large beasts. The king of spiders and snakes all in the course of a couple of days is a pretty horrific combination." His expression turned thoughtful. "That reminds me, we should arrange to go down there with Professor Snape to harvest ingredients from the corpse. I was thinking we could get some armored clothing from the hide, and I'm sure the rare potions ingredients will be worth a pretty penny."

Hermione nodded almost absently. "Yes I'm sure we could bribe Professor Snape with a portion of all the potions ingredients for his help."

The pair lapsed back into a somewhat more comfortable silence as Hagrid finally came back into view, with something even larger following behind him. As Hagrid approached, the large creature behind him straightened up and was even taller in comparison. Hermione whispered urgently, "Harry, that's a full giant."

Harry merely nodded as he greeted Hagrid. "Hey Hagrid, who do you have there?"

Hagrid beamed Harry a smile. "Glad yer asked 'Arry. I met him this summer during Order business. Dumbledore sent me out to the Giant packs and I extended the branch of friendship to the Gurg. I met him

there; he was being picked on by the bigger ones in his pack. After a few questions I realized he was my brother through me mum."

Harry arched his eyebrow as Hagrid turned and bellowed, "Grawpy get over ere, I've got er couple of people for you to meet."

The large figure lumbered into the light, and Hermione gasped quietly as she wrapped her arm around Harry's, squeezing painfully at the sight of the immense figure.

If Grawp was getting picked on by larger giants, Harry decided to make it a point not to deal with any more of them ever again. Even the ones in Hogsmeade that he had attacked were a bit smaller than this Grawp was.

Grawp looked at the pair without a hint of self consciousness before he turned to Hagrid in confusion. "Haggers, who is Grawpy meeting?"

Hagrid beamed with pride. "These are two of my friends, Harry and Hermione, Grawpy. You treat them like I taught yer, and I'll bring you some more meat tomorrow."

Grawp turned his gaze back to Harry and Hermione and grunted as he stepped closer. "Hermy pretty."

Hermione whimpered as she hid behind Harry, who now had his wand out, but not aimed at Grawp, waiting for the giant to settle down. Harry slowly inched Hermione back to his side before he spoke deliberately, "Grawp, Hermione is my mate, so I'd thank you to take a step back."

Grawp blinked at the small wizard before he frowned. "Hermy with puny wizard Harry?"

Harry nodded as he flourished his wand and conjured a large slab of meat. "Exactly Grawp, thank you for understanding. Have this meat as a present for using your manners."

Hagrid could barely contain himself as Grawp took the obliging step backwards before he bit into the slab of meat, and his eyes lit up with pleasure. "Puny Harry and pretty Hermy, Grawp's friends."

Hermione slowly relaxed by Harry's side and she asked in a clear but quiet voice, "Grawp, why don't you have a pretty girl giant of your own?"

Grawp tore a piece of meat from the slab, in an impersonation eerily like Ron during a meal, before he replied, "Other giants pick on Grawp because he too puny. Girl giants no want puny Grawp."

Hermione shared a look with Harry that clearly said 'Puny?' but she consoled the giant, "I'm sure you'll find a girl giant that's right for you eventually Grawp."

Grawp grunted as he lost himself completely in the slab of meat. Hagrid looked mildly embarrassed but tried to cover it. "Right, well let's be getting the two of you back to the castle before it gets too late. Grawpy likes his meat a little more'n he likes visitors I'm 'fraid."

As the three exited the danger of the Forbidden forest Hagrid's voice was grateful. "Dumbledore, he's a great man he is. But you two and Ron, you er great friends to me, and don't worry about me forgettin' it any time soon."

Harry and Hermione smiled their thanks and began the long walk back to the castle. It wasn't quite time for curfew yet, and as Prefects they could afford to be a few minutes after it.

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It was nearly a week later when Harry finally managed to corner Professor Snape about an expedition down into the Chamber of Secrets. Potions class had just let out, and Harry stayed behind on the excuse that he had a question about potions ingredients.

Snape could see there was more to the conversation than that and just as he sealed the door and placed his standard custom made

privacy charm over the room Harry asked, "What do you know about Basilisk parts for potion ingredients Professor?"

Snape arched his eyebrow at the question but replied, "Basilisk parts are much more common in the Southern Hemisphere, and as such are subject to tariff by the Ministry of Magic. Most of the potions Basilisk parts are ingredients in darker potions, but they also are found in powerful restorative draughts. Why do you ask Mr. Potter?"

Harry smiled slowly. "What do you know of my excursion into the Chamber of Secrets my second year?"

Snape's eyes widened momentarily. "Do you mean to tell me that all of the rumors about a Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets are actually true?"

Harry shrugged. "Actually, I'm surprised Professor Dumbledore never told you about it. The one down in the Chamber was around sixty feet in length, and due to the fact that I killed it, I lay claim to the carcass by right. However, I'm not an expert at extracting potion ingredients and I would like to offer you say 20 percent of the ingredients for your services."

Snape glanced at his watch and nodded. "I shall have time to aid you this evening; are your friends going to join us?"

Harry nodded. "Hermione is, I don't want to subject Ron or anyone else to that place again."

Snape gathered his robe around him as he pondered for a moment, "I assume there is more than monetary interest in pursuing this under such short notice."

Harry merely smirked and nodded. "Meet us outside of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom at 8 pm, I have no clue if the entrance is booby trapped now or not, so come prepared."

As Harry exited the Potions classroom Snape sighed miserably as he muttered aloud, "Joining a Potter on an adventure, who would have thought I'd ever look forward to the day."

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Myrtle was floating about in her bathroom; the ghost appeared to be practically giddy at Harry's reappearance.

"Ooh Harry, I knew you'd be back for me. I've known ever since you went into the chamber you've had a soft spot for me." Myrtle cooed as she batted her ghostly eyes coquettishly.

Harry grimaced as Hermione laughed openly at his discomfort before he replied, "Well you are the only ghost to see me starkers." Hermione broke down into tearful laughter at that as she slid down on to the ground leaning against the sink next to the chamber's entrance.

Snape strode into the loo of the infernally aggravating ghost and the sight before him caused a moment of pause, Potter had his head in his hands as Granger, the straight laced know-it-all, was laughing hysterically on the floor.

Managing a half-hearted sneer he said, "I'm ever so pleased to see you taking this seriously."

Harry glanced up and grinned sheepishly at the potion master, a grin Snape had seen on James Potter's face a few times also. Granger stood up, caught halfway between laughter and mortification as she rubbed the tears of laughter from her eyes.

After the pair collected themselves Harry turned to Snape, "Could you put up a suitably powerful confundus charm on the entrance to the bathroom Professor Snape?"

Snape nodded and silently flicked his wand, as the proper spell took hold over the eve of the entrance to the room.

Harry nodded appreciatively, "Ok, please stand back as I do this. As I recall the sinks do expand a bit when the entrance is opened."

Snape watched dispassionately as Potter hissed something at a specific sink, and the whole series of sinks began to slide apart. He

had seen some miraculous things in his life thanks to magic, but seeing a hidden entrance to a chamber long thought to be a myth ranked right up there. For a fleeting moment he wondered what the dark lord had felt when he first uncovered the chamber of his ancestor, but then the thought was gone as he concentrated on the task at hand.

Harry looked at Snape's fathomless dark eyes and he said, "This next part is bound to be a bit uncomfortable, so if you have anything breakable I suggest you keep a hand on it."

With that Harry jumped down into the exposed entrance, disappearing with a whoop that could only be described 'pure Harry'.

Hermione was a bit more sedate as she had pulled her hair back into a bun and closed her eyes as she took the plunge.

The first thing Hermione saw when she cleared the end of the pipe was Harry standing there with his wand in hand as he floated her gently to the ground. The frown on his face was disconcerting, but she didn't have a chance to question him as Snape popped out of the pipe, slowing his own decent with a flick of his wand.

Harry frowned in consternation, as the old Basilisk skin was missing, and that same instinct that had served him so well in the past was screaming in his mind. Slowly he turned to Hermione and Professor Snape and spoke in a concerned tone, "Someone else has been down here recently."

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A/N: There it is, I hope you enjoyed the meeting with Grawp. Grawp won't be a major part of the plot or anything, but Hagrid's statement at the end very well might be. I'll endeavor to have the next chapter out some time next week, but I can make no guarantees as to when.

Question of the Chapter:

Looking back at the Harry Potter series, which one Plot Hole bugs you the most?

I'm looking forward to seeing some interesting answers for this one, so take your time and think about it. Thanks to all of you that have reviewed and thanks for reading.

Disclaimer: It's not mine it's JKR's, although the plot will be mostly mine from henceforth. Also, no one will have a middle name like Hyperion or Severus here.

As always thanks to my beta chem prof

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Hermione considered herself to be a very reasonable and level headed person, so when Harry came into a snag on another of his 'little' adventures she attacked the issue as she always did.

"Has Professor Dumbledore been down here since you were, Harry?" Hermione questioned calmly.

Harry frowned in thought and shook his head. "No, he specifically told me he hasn't, but now that you mention it, he could have made a trip if Fawkes wanted to bring him along."

Snape arched an eyebrow and flicked his wand once as a magical residue of some sort became visible for a brief moment. "Well Potter, it doesn't appear as though anyone has been down here for over a year so I suggest we continue forward and watch for traps."

Harry nodded and beckoned to the pair as he started forward and began to speak. "Hermione, remember that ward detection spell we learned?" Hermione nodded as he continued, "You need to do that to keep an eye out for triggering wards."

Snape nodded approvingly. "I shall endeavor to look for magical residues, because the ward detection spell can be fooled by a talented enough individual."

Harry furrowed his brow as the pair next to him continually flicked their wands searching for any sign of a trap, and serving the other purpose of lighting the dark tunnel as they moved forward. "Coming up ahead is the spot where Lockhart caused the cave in that separated me from Ron. If nothing is here then we'll really have to be careful."

As the three came around the bend, this strange excursion continued to get stranger as the rock slide was now gone, and there was no apparent sign of it ever happening.

Harry began to step forward as Snape hissed, "Stop!"

Harry stopped mid-step as Hermione frowned and flicked her wand. "Nothing is showing up Professor."

Snape narrowed his eyes and murmured something unintelligible as he flicked his wand in an intricate pattern, "As a result of the unfortunate position I took during the Dark Lord's first reign, I was privy to certain obscure magics often practiced by his followers. This was placed by one of the Dark Lord's less competent followers, otherwise you would be quite dead right now Mr. Potter."

Hermione furrowed her brow before she half asked, "Pettigrew?" Harry merely nodded his agreement as they followed behind Snape.

Snape continued to wave his wand before a bright flash filled the subterranean tunnel. "I have dispelled the ward, but I believe it would be best if I lead the way for the remainder, Mr. Potter."

Harry merely motioned Snape to take the lead and fell back into line with Hermione as he quietly asked, "Do you know the spell he's using by any chance?"

Hermione frowned. "It's not included in any of the books of detection spells I've read, but we can check the library after we've finished up here."

Harry merely nodded as he gripped his wand a little more tightly and closed up on Snape as the older wizard rounded the final corner leading to the main entrance of the Chamber of Secrets.

Snape eyed the archway surrounding the door and he turned to Harry and he drawled, "I assume only a parselmouth can get the door to open?"

Harry nodded, and he gazed at the snakes on the archway before he finally hissed, "Open." Just as it had done the last time the door opened with a squelching sound.

Snape glanced around as he flicked his wand, before he beckoned the two Gryffindors in after he entered the chamber himself.

Harry gazed at the still intact basilisk corpse in the middle of the large central chamber as he ignored Hermione's gasp, but he did take a certain perverse pleasure at the widening of Snape's eyes.

In a light tone he commented, "So, who fancies a basilisk harvest?"

Snape nodded in understanding as he slowly approached the corpse, checking for residual magic before he felt a spike of foreign magic and he hissed, "Potter, would you be so kind as to explain the events as they occurred in the chamber."

Harry nodded and gave the specifics of the diary, Ginny Weasley, and the death of the basilisk. Snape pondered the complete story for a long moment before he stated, "Gryffindor's sword is a goblin made sword. Technically, goblin made swords absorb the magical properties of something more inherently magical than the sword. Hence, a goblin made sword won't steal the magic of a witch or wizard, but it will steal the magic of something as powerful as a basilisk. I would estimate Albus is aware of this very thing, and only allows you to hold the sword due to your own mishap with basilisk venom."

Harry listened to Snape for a moment, somewhat surprised at the information before he allowed the professor to make a logical, albeit incorrect conclusion. In retrospect it did make sense that he wasn't allowed to use the sword in his practice, but Dumbledore had suggested he use the sword during the third task. Thoughts of the headmaster generally sent him to a dark place recently so he stopped the train of thought before it progressed much further.

Snape watched Potter think on his words for a long moment before he continued, well aware that Granger had fished out a blank piece of parchment and a muggle pen to take some notes.

"But, that doesn't explain this echo of very powerful dark magic I have detected here. I take it that the diary you speak of, was more than a mere object of the Dark Lord's education at Hogwarts?" Snape finished in a questioning tone.

Harry nodded. "The diary was a very dark object known as a horcrux. I'd imagine if you asked the headmaster for more information he would tell you about them."

Snape's eyes became calculating. "Of course, it would explain the Dark Lord's seeming immortality if he underwent such drastic measures. You say that you used a basilisk fang to stab the diary, correct?"

Harry nodded as Snape stepped over the site of the Horcruxes death and continued on to the basilisk. "Basilisk venom is potent enough to overcome nearly every magical protection I know of, save for phoenix tears. That particular piece of the Dark Lord's soul has been irretrievably destroyed."

Hermione finally chimed in. "Professor, you speak like there would be more than one of these Horcruxes."

Snape arched his eyebrow as he silently cast a spell that began to cut into the hard hide of the dead 60-foot basilisk. "The Dark Lord never does anything in halves Ms. Granger. If he went to the drastic measure of purposely splintering his soul, he would have made multiple objects of similar composition."

Hermione nodded, but she frowned thoughtfully as she watched Snape begin the process of removing the basilisk hide. Harry had already pondered enough on the depressing topic so he decided on a different one. "Professor, what spell are you using to detect magical residues? It seems like it would be very useful to learn."

Snape flicked his wand as the hide began to peel away from the snake's skeleton. "The spell is a rather simple one; *deprehensio magus* is the incantation Mr. Potter. Typically it is used by curse breakers, or their competition, magical grave robbers. While wards

are the standard in terms of magical protections, there are other avenues for those willing to make the proper sacrifices. With enough practice a competent witch or wizard can cast the spell silently, and without the requisite wand motions. But, I shall leave that bit of research up to you and Ms. Granger."

Harry's eyes bulged at the huge pile of basilisk hide from the 60 foot long monster, and he imagined the hide would be enough to make vests for everyone in the study group and the more active Order members. Hermione came up to his side and quietly she asked, "When did Dumbledore share this with you?"

Harry shrugged. "About ten days ago. I've been dealing with some complications and haven't had the time to share it with you."

Hermione narrowed her eyes in irritation, the prophecy coming to mind as a similar situation where Harry tried to shoulder the burden of something like this alone, "Have you figured out a solution to the complication?"

Harry sighed and replied, "No, I haven't found a means of removing a horcrux from a living person."

Hermione gasped as her hand flew to her mouth as the real reason for his withholding the information was revealed, "I'll help you Harry."

Harry nodded grimly. "I had Dobby grab me any books on the subject he could from the Black library. Unfortunately, I haven't had much time to look at them beyond a brief skim."

Hermione reached over and grasped his hand tightly. "We'll make time for it Harry." With a heavy sigh she added, "But, you need to share this kind of stuff with me Harry. I can help you shoulder your burdens, but only if you let me. I'm not going anywhere, I promise you that."

As though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders he genuinely smiled, suddenly believing that if anyone could find a means of ridding him of the horcrux it would be Hermione.

Snape watched the pair out of the corner of his eye and sighed, thinking of another brilliant young woman and her best friend. He knew in his heart that no matter what he did in the war that was quickly approaching, he would always owe a debt to Lily Potter that went beyond any simple life debt.

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The days of February melted away, much like the snow in the Highlands surrounding Hogwarts. The attacks from Voldemort and his forces remained muted, but everyone knew that it was soon to change.

At the Ministry of Magic, preparations for war had been consuming most of the Ministry employees in one way or another. Few knew of Minister Scrimgeour's ultimate agenda, and those that did had surely been subject to magical vows of secrecy of some sort.

In the DMLE a single man was pondering the rapidly changing environment of the Ministry, one where spies of the Dark Lord were rapidly being culled out and given brutal justice where it was appropriate. While the Dark Lord had planned for such an eventuality, it didn't protect his followers from veritaserum or some of the more questionable means of deriving the truth that the Aurors had envisioned.

The Dark Lord's forces worked from a splinter cell mentality, in that one agent knew at most two other followers in his Ministry ranks. Many other followers were simply solo agents, and would complete a previously designated task when the proper authorization came to them. It was a very complicated and intricate network, and one which didn't easily lead itself to being full stamped out.

A non-descript barn owl swooped down into the office and dropped a rolled parchment on the man's desk, an act that happened so frequently no one paid it any heed.

Unfurling the parchment he read the simple message written in the Dark Lord's own writing:

Execute ward breakdown of Auror Academy tonight.

The man's face was lit with a malicious smile for a fleeting moment, before it once again slid behind a well crafted mask of joviality. Grabbing two pieces of parchment specifically charmed for such a purpose he jotted down the requisite instructions and sent off two separate interoffice memos; one went to the opposite corner of the DMLE, and the other headed off to the Department of Magical Catastrophes. Tonight the magical world would tremble in fear of the Dark Lord's might.

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Dale Dawlish frowned as he read a day old copy of the Daily Prophet while he sipped on some cold coffee still remaining in the staff break room of the Auror training academy. He had been unprepared for how far, and how fast he had fallen in esteem amongst his fellow Aurors after his seemingly short appointment to Minister Fudge's personal security detail.

Sure, he had done some legally questionable things, but when the Minister of Magic told you to take care of a threat, you did so, right? Apparently, this wasn't an attitude shared amongst the Auror command groups, and as a result he, an Auror for nearly 20 years, was relegated to teaching the worthless twats in the Auror training academy. Merlin, he was amazed at how ineptly the apparent cream of the crop was at casting a simple shield charm. He had heard rumors that the Defense Against the Dark Arts professors at Hogwarts had gotten worse since he had attended, but he never would have guessed it was this bad.

He threw the paper down in disgust after he read yet another gossip column about Harry bloody Potter and his muggleborn love. Walking over to the small kitchenette in the lounge he dumped the remainder of his coffee down the drain. He was about to make a final check on the trainees' bunks before heading to his own personal quarters, when the ward alarm sounded, indicating that the wards were about to be breeched and brought down.

Dawlish cursed and brandished his wand as the recruits began to pile out of their living quarters. He waited anxiously for his fellow staff members to arrive, but they never did. The wards fell a moment later and the front door was blasted inwards with amazing force.

There was no escape, because due to the intense nature of the training the only way off of the island was via boat at the end of the training, so that recruits couldn't come and go as they pleased.

Dawlish screamed at the 40 recruits present, "Remember your training boys and girls, fight to kill because it's either you or them!"

A moment later a swarm of black cloaks came into the main area as green spells filled the air, seeking to kill before anything else.

Dawlish and a couple of the competent recruits recognized the telltale green spell and dodged the curses, and the lesser students raised shield spells that flickered away as the casters were killed. Dawlish swore as he sent off an eviscerating curse into the group, glancing back to see around 20 of the recruits remaining. He had always been a student of the dodge at all costs school of thought, but many Aurors were too proud to act in kind. Of course, earning his chops in Voldemort's first reign had shown him the reasons for feeling like he did.

He heard a few of the Death Eaters scream out as he and the recruits returned fire, and they managed to batter the Death Eaters' left flank as the masked bastards slowly advanced.

Dawlish glanced around feeling slightly panicked, as he looked for some means of turning the situation to their advantage. The numbers appeared to be slightly against them at the moment, but that could change with a good plan.

As he shot a spell he felt an intense flash of fire on his non-wand arm as a few more of the better recruits succumbed to killing curses. He knew it was over now, and a cursory glance over to his burning arm revealed he had lost his left arm at the elbow as blood slowly began to pool under him.

As he waited for his death he traded a few more spells and managed to drop one more of the cloaked bastards that were within 20 feet now. Suddenly, the Death Eaters stopped firing spells and they dropped to one knee as the air took on a palpable charge.

Dawlish trembled as he laid eyes on the Dark Lord. The man was imposing, despite his completely bald head and slim stature. His red eyes burned into his brain as Dawlish keeled over and vomited before he passed out.

Voldemort smiled thinly as he looked around at the accumulated carnage. He turned and looked over his shoulder and called out, "Barty, attend me."

Barty Crouch Jr., looking his healthiest since his stay in Azkaban, strode into the room. His eyes still held the glint of madness, but now it was a focused madness of sorts. He bowed to Voldemort and asked, "How can I serve you my lord?"

Voldemort nodded to the man as he stood up. "I wish for you to clean up this mess, taking care to make a creative example of the dead Aurors for those that will be coming soon. Any of my forces that have been injured should be suitably punished for their failure. Make them aware of the price of less than perfection in my eyes."

Barty smiled maliciously as he swept his long bangs from his eyes. "It will be done as you've requested my lord."

Voldemort nodded once. "I'm sure it will be." He glanced over to the unconscious Dawlish. "That one right there, he was the only one of the staff not my follower. Treat his death with proper reverence."

Barty nodded as Voldemort swirled his cloak and vanished with nary a sound signaling his apparition. Grinning madly he turned to the nearest Death Eater and barked, "You heard our lord, take the Auror bodies and put them in a pile by that far wall. Our injured should be fitted with the portkeys and sent back to our dungeons." Looking down at Dawlish's downed form he added, "I shall deal with this one personally."

As the various lower Death Eaters did as they were told, Barty waved his wand and Dawlish awoke with a blood-curdling scream. With a flick of his wand the man's gut was sliced open.

Dawlish blinked his eyes blearily before he focused on Barty and coughed up some blood. Barty knelt down next to the man and as he reached down and plunged his hand into the hole in Dawlish's belly grasping organs he simply said, "You might want to scream now, because this is going to hurt."

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Harry stared out into the sky on a cold February night; he had gotten a call via mirror from Remus informing him about the attack at the Auror Academy. More senseless deaths, and he had to wonder what evil part of Riddle had first urged him to kill another person. The sky always put things in perspective, but he didn't use the stars to divine the future like the centaurs, for him it was to make sense of the present and remember the happiness of the past.

He remembered looking into the same sky less than two years earlier on the night he discovered his godfather's innocence and the true betrayer of his parents. He remembered sitting on the edge of the forest with Hermione as they talked about everything and nothing waiting for their one chance to put everything right. If he was honest with himself about his immature feelings that night; it was when he first fell a little in love with Hermione.

Their silly courting dance the next year had been a necessary part of growing up, but it wasn't something he wanted to experience again with another girl. The stars continued to shine down as he thought about all of the death and pain that was surely coming to this world where he had found acceptance. It had become a bit of a ritual for him in the past several months; he would sneak away in the dead of night, and travel through the shadows from the flickering torches throughout the school.

Hermione never pushed him on the mornings when she could see he hadn't slept as much, and that understanding meant more to him ten times over than the mothering someone like Molly Weasley would

give. Taking a deep breath of cold air he sighed; with the knowledge that he was harbouring a piece of Voldemort's soul he had contemplated for a very brief second the virtues of suicide. The thought had passed just as quickly, and he had felt the same disgust as he always did when those morbid wasteful thoughts assaulted his mind.

He had so very much to live for now, and it wouldn't do to dwell on the painful things for too long, because if he did he would forget the happy moments he had made as well. Just as quickly as he had arrived, he transformed and vanished into the shadows, there were after all things that needed to be done still.

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"Remember to practice the Incarcerous jinx in your spare time people. Next meeting I'll have something for each of you, so make sure you show up," Harry finished as the study group members began to gather their bags and robes before leaving the room.

Ron sighed as he grabbed his cloak and gazed back up to his best friends. Hermione said something quietly that could only be heard by the two of them and Harry gave her a soft smile as she blushed. He barely suppressed a grimace; he was fortunate that he didn't have to watch them be cute like this often, because they tended to be rather private about their relationship.

Ginny came up to his side and her face twisted up slightly before she said, "Watching the golden couple are you?"

Ron shrugged before he stated, "I just wish I was better at this stuff. I mean sure, I'm not a slouch but I'm nowhere near good enough to be by their side like I used to be. I feel like I'm letting them down by not contributing somehow."

Ginny didn't know how to reply to that, so she settled on a sympathetic pat on the shoulder before she left to catch up with her friends on the day off. The news of the Auror Academy had struck all of them hard, but fortunately none of the students lost any close family members in the latest tragedy of the war. This was everyone's

first day off from classes since the attack, and understandably everyone wanted to spend whatever time they could with their friends and loved while they still could.

After Ginny left, Ron mussed his hair up and decided to leave his friends some precious moments of privacy. As he wandered the halls, he began to think on the war in earnest for the first time since his dad had died.

Last time around Voldemort had based his war on blood purity, and now it seemed that he was intent on murdering those that opposed him. It didn't take a genius to realize that his next target was the Ministry. The attack on the Auror Academy was proof enough, but Ron had to wonder what could be gained by it. The Ministry was a huge machine, of over one thousand employees. It wasn't like Voldemort would have the manpower to run a government without the proper infrastructure; at least he hoped he didn't.

One of Ron's few secrets he kept from everyone was that he and his father had spent hours discussing the politics of the Ministry, and how to be an honest person amidst the corruption. It had come this summer that his father had lamented to him in private that he should have had the same discussions with Percy, even if the prat had turned the corner on his ambitious foolishness. But now as he pondered this, his mind began to churn with ideas, the kind of ideas that would be helpful to his friends.

Spinning on heel he started back towards Gryffindor tower. He needed to get some of this written down before he forgot it.

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March had come to Scotland and with it cold spring rains to wash away the detritus that winter had left the occupants around Hogwarts. For most students all this meant was that if they had class with Hagrid they should have an umbrella, or at least cast a water repelling charm on their clothes. For the fifth year students however, it was the moment when they decided what career track they wanted to hop onto. Hermione had been understandably frazzled during the week. Their OWL revisions had been going so well that she, of all

people, declared that this first week in March would be revision free to leave her to stress only about the career counseling.

It was in the common room where the appointment times and days were posted by Cedric Diggory, as per one of his many duties as Head Boy. Cedric grinned as the fifth years crowded around the bulletin board and he turned to Harry as he stood back and let his tenacious girlfriend check both of their times. "So Harry, how has the year been going?"

Harry yawned and his shoulder slumped. "It's been a bloody long year Cedric. Aside from everything happening outside of the castle, revising for our OWLs, prefect duties, and Quidditch starting back up full time soon with the snow melting away, I've been busy."

Cedric nodded sagely. "Aye, but you seem to be doing fine with it." Cedric took in Harry's slouched posture and he stated, "You don't really tell anyone how tired you are feeling do you?"

Harry shook his head, and for a moment Cedric wondered why he of all people was the one the Gryffindor trusted to talk to about this. But then again it made sense in that Cedric had always been a sympathetic ear, and he was completely insulated from Harry's life. Who better could Harry find to discuss this with?

Cedric gripped Harry's shoulder and noticed that the smallish boy he competed against in the Tri-wizard tournament was roughly his height, if not a bit thinner. "Harry, you are one of the most driven people I've ever met. Once in awhile you need to take some time and just get away from all of this, if you need to take your brainy girlfriend with you then do so. I'd be remiss not to extol the positives of having a brainy but sexy girlfriend. When we have the week off for Easter Holiday in a month, make sure you get away from the magical world. You grew up with muggles, so I doubt it'll be a challenge to find something nice for you and your muggleborn girlfriend to do a few different nights."

Harry took a deep breath and smiled gratefully at Cedric. "Thanks mate, I just...it piles up on me sometimes, you know?"

Cedric nodded once. "That I do." Releasing Harry's shoulder he rolled his eyes. "I've still got Slytherin to post the listings for, but try to keep what I said in mind, ok?" Harry smiled slightly and nodded as Cedric left the common room, the portrait closing softly behind him.

As if almost like clockwork, Hermione bustled over and exclaimed, "Harry, I have my session tomorrow and yours is on Wednesday." She immediately began worrying her lower lip with her teeth. "Oh, I just know Professor McGonagall is going to tell me I don't qualify for what I want to do."

Harry laughed lightly. "Hermione, if you don't qualify to be a curse breaker I'll do anything you want me to."

That got her attention and she smiled dangerously. "Anything, you say?"

Harry's groan could be heard by everyone in the common room, but most of them ignored it as they were used to the peculiarities of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger.

.....

This was one of the rare times when Minerva McGonagall would go into a professional setting with her hair down, to coin a phrase. She knew the anxiety students always felt this time of year, and she had lobbied to have career counseling moved to the beginning of 4th year for the students, so that they would have some time to prepare for all of the demands a selected career might bring.

She had already had visits from Dean Thomas and Lavender Brown; they were both pleasant students, even if they weren't the cream of the crop. Both had reasonable career aspirations, and both also discussed the possibility of working in the muggle world, should the magical one get worse with the war. Next, she had the young woman that reminded her most of how she was many years ago, before numerous deaths hardened her smile into the stern veneer she now carried.

A soft knock on the door signaled her next appointment and she called out, "Come in Ms. Granger."

Hermione opened the door with a thick folder in her arms and she took the offered seat before she said, "Thank you for taking your time Professor."

Minerva merely smiled. "If I told you that the pleasure was mine, would it matter?" Hermione blushed at the gentle teasing and Minerva nodded. "So, with your grades Ms. Granger most careers are open to you. However, I do believe we can strike Quidditch off of your list of desired careers, correct?"

Hermione barely refrained from rolling her eyes. "I'd say it was a safe bet to make, yes professor."

Minerva pressed her lips together to suppress another smile. "Very well, what are your thoughts?"

Hermione reached into her folder and handed a parchment to McGonagall, looking so excited she might burst at the seams.

Minerva read the parchment completely before she nodded. "Curse breaking is a very challenging and rewarding career by all accounts. William Weasley only has good things to say about it as a profession. Have you perchance spoken to him about what his profession entails?"

Hermione nodded and McGonagall asked, "If I might ask, why would you choose this career so emphatically?"

Hermione replied frankly, "Harry and I realized that when he deals with Voldemort, he'll be even more famous and people will be coming out of the woodwork to get a piece of him. It won't be like it was for Professor Dumbledore, because he won't be a middle aged wizard when he defeats his dark wizard. So, we both looked for a challenging career that would keep us out of the country when we choose to be so. Harry will still have to deal with his Wizengamot seat, so we'll keep a home here, but the press is enough, without having to worry about obsessed witches wielding potions."

McGonagall blinked. "Mr. Potter plans to become a curse breaker also?"

Hermione nodded. "Harry does have a fair amount of money from his family, but we aren't really the types to hold parties and socialize for appearances as we live off that money."

McGonagall nodded thoughtfully, although she was a little disappointed. "Very well, I must say that Britain will be losing the services of two of its brightest in the process however."

Hermione shrugged as she accepted her parchment back. "We'll return to Britain in time, and we'll raise our family here if things have died down. If things improve here, I could even see us teaching after all of the children are gone, however many we decide on."

McGonagall smiled. "Well, let us hope that the day you speak of comes to pass then. I can think of nothing more I would look forward to seeing than you as a Professor. I believe that is all we need discuss for now, remember that my office is open to you whenever you need me."

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Rufus Scrimgeour was not a happy man, and that had been the state of things ever since the slaughter at the Auror Academy. As he took the Floo into his office he was immediately greeted by his assistant as the woman began with a rush, "Good morning Minister Scrimgeour. I have your itinerary for the day on your desk, and Madam Bones has already sent a memo requesting an audience after lunch."

Rufus grunted as he limped over to his desk and sat down heavily. As a reflex to the rigors of the office he grabbed the itinerary and began to read. "So, an intelligence meeting first off today, do you know anything about this?" Rufus turned his gaze to his assistant and the blonde haired woman fidgeted for a moment.

"Yes sir, I did give you notice of the meeting last week sir, I believe it is in regards to the captured followers of You-Know-Who," the woman stammered nervously.

Rufus stood from his desk and grabbed the piece of parchment. "Inform Madam Bones that she is welcome to join me in my office after lunch." Limping slightly he exited his office where his two personal Auror guards waited for him.

Few people knew of the final oaths every Minister of Magic was required to make before entering office, and those that did were under very punitive secrecy oaths to prevent the secret from getting out. In essence, every Minister of Magic had to do everything within their power to ensure the Ministry's overall survival. Cornelius Fudge had certainly skirted a fine line with that specific requirement, but the man had always been able to rationalize to himself, and thusly his magic, that his actions were indeed just that.

As Rufus limped down the hallway he cursed himself for being a realist in terms of his own personal politics. It was something which he had formed from his years in the field as an auror, and it wasn't a coincidence that the best Ministers in history were at one point connected to law enforcement.

Thusly, when it came to his attention that the Dark Lord would be plotting against the Ministry, he was compelled by the oath to do everything in his power to fulfill his duties. If he had ignored Dumbledore's and Potter's words, it would have been a simple expedient of steering the Ministry in a straight line and accepting the bribes that came with such a prestigious position.

At this time it was a moot point; he had the knowledge and the oath compelled him to act in his own personal best accordance with it. He had plans on top of plans that he only shared bits and pieces of with any one person. He couldn't risk the truth getting out to Voldemort, so this was the only way he could deal with it.

His Auror guards stopped at the door that the Minister entered and turned outward to look for any potential threats coming in their

direction. As the doors closed the last thing that could be heard was Rufus' gruff voice. "So what did you find out?"

A cloaked man, the sure sign of the rare Unspeakable that was out completing Ministry business, replied, "The Dark Lord has gone to much greater lengths than it his first rise, and he has done some remarkable things to protect his interests within the Ministry. He has placed several sleeper cells like the one responsible for bringing the wards down at the Auror Academy. Each one has been assigned to complete a specific task, but only when their master orders them to do so. Unfortunately, the random veritaserum testing has only managed to root out some of these sleeper cells, and I doubt you'd be able to do more without slowing the Ministry and its business to a crawl."

Rufus nodded to himself as he ran a hand through his mane of hair in deep thought. "I dare not push further than the random veritaserum testing if this is the case. See if you can come up with a way of flushing these groups out, and I want another briefing on possible ideas this time next week. For now, I'll leave you to your duties, because I have my own to tend to as well." As Rufus left the briefing room, he knew now that the worst would come to pass, and he still had so much left to accomplish.

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A/N: Well there it is, another chapter down and another chapter closer to the end of the year. If I have any luck I can wrap this year up by the end of my semester here at school, and before I get busy with work again.

Question of the chapter:

Recent news has shown that JK Rowling is suing the creator of the HP lexicon for trying to publish a Harry Potter encyclopedia, what are your thoughts on the issue?

Does Rowling owe similar websites to HP Lexicon some latitude for being free sources of advertising for her books, and for the movies that are based off of them?

Thanks to all of you that have kept up with the story, and keep up the great reviews.

Disclaimer: The characters, settings, and assorted other paraphernalia are JKR's not mine

Disclaimer: The characters, settings, and assorted other paraphernalia are JKR's not mine. The plot is becoming mostly mine at this point, but I learned in kindergarten the importance of sharing as long as someone asks first.

Thanks as always to my beta chem prof

A/N: Lot's of H/Hr interaction this chapter, but I wouldn't call it fluff exactly.

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As had become the custom when Harry and his friends needed to travel a distance, they were ushered into Hogsmeade and the rebuilt Hog's Head tavern as they took the private Floo connection to Grimmauld Place. This time it was only Harry and Hermione being ushered through the Floo, and as a result they actually had the time to look around at the rebuilt building.

Their Order escort Hestia Jones noticed their curious gazes and she quietly stated, "Dumbledore thought rebuilding this old dump would be a far better monument to his brother than anything else. Of course, the intelligence gathered by old Elphias doesn't hurt anything either."

Harry blandly replied, "Yes, I've seen the overwhelming successes the Order have been dealing with lately." Hestia frowned as Hermione gazed at the back of Harry's head disapprovingly, he had been much more cynical lately and it was starting to bother the bushy haired witch.

An awkward silence filled the room before Hestia cleared her throat as she glanced down at her watch, "Right then, you have your Floo pouches."

The pair nodded as Harry offered his hand to Hermione to aid her in getting into the fireplace; she smiled her thanks as she stepped in and dropped her pouch, before vanishing in a swirl of green flames.

Harry sighed as he stepped in next, his sardonic half smile all the apology he had in his heart for Hestia as he vanished in a swirl of flames a moment later.

Grimmauld Place looked much more lived in than Harry had ever seen it before, the various times he had talked with Sirius over the mirrors since his return to Hogwarts hadn't really indicated such a large change in the living arrangements.

Hermione had once again disappeared into the large house for some reason; as such Harry was left alone to wander into the parlor room looking for the other inhabitants of the house.

He happened upon Sirius, Remus, and a few others quietly talking around the meeting table as he popped his head into the room, and nodded to his godfather and uncle of sorts.

Sirius smiled in response and quietly said, "Good to see you back Harry. Take a seat, and we'll catch up."

Harry did as suggested and settled in before looking around the room at the rest of those present. Remus, Tonks, Sirius, Emmeline and Evelyn Vance were clustered around the table, the rings under their eyes all the more evidence of how poorly the war effort had been going lately.

Remus' eyes lit up for a moment and he exclaimed, "Merlin Harry, I completely forgot to tell you last time we talked." Harry arched his eyebrow in bemusement; the outburst was rather out of character for the mild mannered man.

Glancing over at Tonks he explained. "I proposed to Tonks, and she took mercy on me and accepted."

Tonks snorted. "Quite the romantic, isn't he?"

Harry shrugged and smirked. "You're the one that said yes, so who's really to blame?"

Remus tried to look affronted and failed horribly as Tonks laughed before reaching out and grasping his hand in apology. The others laughed quietly, as if being louder about it would draw undue attention to them.

Sirius shook his head with a small smile on his face. "Anyways, where is your better half kiddo?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "She disappeared, probably getting some clothes ready for a trip out into muggle London tonight."

Remus shared a look with Tonks. "We'll go with you to cover any security issues. I think Tonks wanted to hit a place in Hackney after we take in a movie."

Harry shrugged, "Can we actually get in?"

Tonks answered. "Your passport doubles as an ID when muggles look at it. It'll show you as legal to get in and drink. But, this is a pretty trendy place, and seeing as how I'll have to dress Remy, you might want to get Hermione's input."

Harry grinned ruefully. "She'll make me wear those bloody contacts I got over the hols."

Sirius decided to chime in. "While this is fascinating listening to you ladies discussing proper attire, I figure we should catch you up on Order business."

Harry snapped to attention as Sirius explained. "We've been bloody useless trying to do something to stop Voldemort. The one plan we have that isn't completely reactive is the little trap you helped lay down at the Department of Mysteries. All of us here have been putting in time there at night; Moony and Tonks have the night off, hence they have plans. Emmeline and Bill Weasley are the ones on call tonight."

Tonks spoke next. "Even Dumbledore has looked depressed lately at the meetings, and when I asked McGonagall she said he'd been like that since a meeting with you."

Harry frowned, feeling slightly uncomfortable. "We had a disagreement on something, and while I'll work with the Professor, I'm not going to be taking orders from him any more."

Sirius arched his eyebrow as he reached down and began to rub Evelyn's thigh almost absently. "What kind of something might that have been?"

Harry sighed. "Something about my scar; Hermione has been researching solutions to it. If you want to know more, I'd recommend asking the pr-Dumbledore."

All of the adults were aware of Harry's word choice, but decided not to press the matter as Sirius picked back up. "Anyways, Dung has picked up that Voldemort is stepping up recruitment to Hogwarts students over Easter. Don't be surprised if you have to deal with a bunch of junior death eaters when you get back to Hogwarts next week."

Harry rolled his neck as he closed his eyes before he exhaled deeply. "That is something I will deal with when I get back to Hogwarts." Straightening up he added, "Malfoy seemed pretty opposed to the idea of taking the mark when he talked to me last year. But, I can't see how he would avoid it now, unless he planned on dying in the process. I imagine Voldemort has figured a way to get the mark around the wards at Hogwarts by this point."

The others all shared glances before Sirius nodded. "I'll be sure to tell Albus that then." Nodding to himself he waved his hand. "Go find the boss and get ready to go out and forget about all of this for the night. It'll hold until tomorrow at the least."

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The four enjoyed a stock romantic comedy playing at a nearby cinema, and they had apparated side along to the club that Tonks had mentioned. A line was already forming outside the door and by most definitions of the term; the night was still rather young.

The bouncer outside the door waved to the group when he saw Tonks in their midst, opening the velvet rope for them as he smiled. "Hey there beautiful, brought some friends with you tonight."

Tonks grinned as she introduced them. "Our two younger friends are Harry and Hermione, and this is Remus my fiancé."

The bouncer surprised them all by laughing. "I wish you all the luck in the world Remus; you've got a bit of a nutter on your hands. She's lovely but an absolute nutter."

Tonks elbowed the large man in the stomach and he didn't even wince as he opened the door. "Right then, well live band in the house tonight, so I'd suggest taking a table before they're all gone."

Tonks led the group into the club making a beeline for an empty table off to the side of the room, but as a result it had a mostly unobstructed view to the stage. Settling into the seats around the table Tonks for once looked serious as she turned to Harry. "So, short of telling us what you said to Albus in that office I think it is time you make a decision about what you want."

Harry blinked in surprise at Tonks' tone before he replied, "What decision would that be?"

Hermione and Remus both watched in interest as Tonks explained, "You said you weren't going to take orders from Dumbledore any more. Seeing as how he is the top of the food chain, just exactly what are you going to do? Will you start up on your own, or swallow your pride and crawl back to Dumbledore?"

Harry exhaled a deep breath before he answered. "It might surprise you to know, but I have thought about what I need to do, and what everyone else needs me to do."

Tonks lost whatever momentum she assumed she had been building up to that point and went silent as Harry explained. "I'm not trying to be some ponce like Lockhart when I say that short of Dumbledore I am probably the most accomplished wizard in the Order. Mad-Eye is

great, but he hasn't faced up to Voldemort in any meaningful way from what he has told me."

Tonks and Remus both looked fascinated as Harry continued, Hermione giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. "It won't do anyone a lick of good for me to break away from the Order and its resources, and frankly the Order needs me as well. I figured I would do something so obscene and unheard of that we might actually have a chance in the war."

Tonks and Remus leaned in as Harry smiled, but not the kindhearted smile they were accustomed to seeing from him, this was a smile that made them suppress a shiver as he said, "Instead of reacting to every bloody attack, I'm going to see who in the Order actually wants to take the fight to Voldemort and his slaves. It's time for those bloody insane cowards to have something else to fear aside from their sadistic leader. Dumbledore has had fifty years to deal with Riddle, and it has been an abysmal failure where he let the murderers run free, because he was afraid of becoming too much like them in the process. But, what good are morals and the high ground when everyone who has them dies?"

Hermione spoke into the awkward silence as Harry took deep breaths in an attempt to calm his nerves, and suppress his anger. "All of you adults in the Order have had years to deal with people like Lucius Malfoy, and what did you do? You buried your heads in the sand and forgot what you had actually fought and died for in the first place. I'll say it right now so there will be no one to question me, I will follow Harry, not Dumbledore and certainly not the Ministry. If the past five years have taught me anything, is that Harry is the only person I know who never loses when it really matters. Can Dumbledore say the same without lying to himself?"

Remus and Tonks were still absolutely silent, but now looked a little pale as Harry spoke again, the determination in his voice being enough to focus them on his words. "I'm not going to sit here and watch people die as Riddle dictates the terms of this war, and while I know that I'm no match for him now, I can say with absolute certainty that I am bridging the gap every single day. There will come a time that I will face him and either kill him or die trying, but I do know that I

can do everything I can to remove those that follow him, and I can weaken him with every one of his little slaves that I deal with." His face lightened as he closed his eyes. "But, for the rest of the weekend I don't want to talk on this again. This is my weekend away from the worst of this insanity, so don't bring it up unless you want me to prank you mercilessly."

Remus cleared his throat, quelling whatever Tonks was about to say as he murmured, "In a perfect world, you wouldn't have to worry about more than doing well on your O.W.L exams. But, since we don't live in a perfect world, you'll just have to accept that I'll help you any way I can." Grinning slightly he added, "Merlin, if that's how you dealt with Dumbledore I'm not surprised he looked depressed."

Everyone else chuckled lightly, and it seemed the worst of the tension lingering had been dispelled. The war was ongoing, but even those on the front lines needed a break from its realities every once in awhile.

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Rufus Scrimgeour was beginning to feel rather irritated about the general state of things at his Ministry, and the wizarding world in relation to the British Isles. His request for more aid via the International Confederation of Wizards had been soundly denied; the members had little patience for his claims of how corrupt the infrastructure was from years of Fudge's incompetence and power mongering. Dark Lords had always been regional affairs, and as such he didn't even bother to play that angle at the negotiating table.

More muggles died every day, and even with regular reports to the muggle Prime Minister he knew that tensions were reaching a boiling point. The secrecy laws were paramount to the continued viability of the wizarding world, and while Voldemort was a power hungry madman he had always taken care to make his attacks on muggles discrete as possible. The dementors on the other hand were completely invisible to muggle eyes, and thusly were his ultimate tool against the Ministry and the muggles all wrapped into one.

He shook his head in irritation, the dark lord's followers in the Ministry continued to be whittled down, but he knew it was a losing battle in the long run. Nodding to his assistant he strode into his office, glancing over at the portrait connecting his office to the Prime Minister's with something akin to trepidation before he limped over and spoke to the officious looking man in the portrait, "Tell Mr. Major to expect me in his office and to make the agreed upon arrangements."

The man in the portrait bustled away and Rufus rubbed his lame leg. It seemed like every day involved a new challenge for the Minister of Magic.

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Hermione blearily opened her eyes as her magical alarm clock played the shrill tune for the Chudley Cannons fight song. She didn't know who deserved the painful death, Sirius or Remus, but it would hold until she got a nice hot shower and prepared for the special day she had planned.

She and Harry had settled into a comfortable spot in their relationship, and while she accepted that, she also knew that they had to try new things together to keep it from getting stale or boring. Crookshanks had stayed at Hogwarts. Ginny had offered her services in cat minding and the part kneazle had accepted on his own behalf.

After a refreshing shower, and some time spent fixing her hair properly she dressed in a manner both formal and yet relaxed. It was still barely breaking dawn at this point, but she figured Harry could always sleep in tomorrow as she walked into his room. It never failed for Harry any more, he never closed the door in his room when he slept, and he only sparingly used the bed coverings in the boy's dormitory at Hogwarts. She was certain it was somehow related to his many years sleeping in the cramped cupboard at the Dursleys, and thanked the heavens that keeping an open door was the worst of his obvious lingering issues from his upbringing.

She smiled softly as she listened to him snore ever so softly as his body was contorted strangely, sprawled across the bed. It hadn't

really struck her before now, but Harry was becoming rather tall now, probably two meters tall if not an inch more. Seeing him last night in his contacts made her wish that he gave up his glasses all of the time, but some habits just died hard and she would pick her battles only when it was important.

With a small flick of her wand a pillow levitated off of the bed and hovered over Harry's face, waiting to pounce. Another flick and the pillow swatted his face with just enough force to wake him up and he shot up in bed, his eyes slowly opening as he blinked owlishly. "W-what?"

Hermione smiled sweetly as she hid her wand in her holster and cheerfully said, "Good Morning Harry."

Harry looked at her blankly for a moment before he asked in a voice still slightly slurred from sleep, "What time is it?"

Hermione made a big show of glancing at her wristwatch before she murmured, "Around 7, now get up so we can do what I want to today."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut before he sighed, "Ok, but there had better be some hot tea waiting for me down in the kitchen after I get showered and dressed."

Hermione nodded before she turned for the door. "I put some clothes out for you in the bathroom, and wear your contacts again."

Harry grumbled as he rolled out of bed, wearing some pajama pants and his typically unruly mop of hair on his head. Blindly he grasped his glasses before he also took the time to grab his contacts in the container by the bed. With a wave of his hand, the messy bed was remade and he shuffled over towards the bathroom, and the inviting hot water needed to wake him up.

It was nearly twenty minutes later when a mostly refreshed Harry Potter walked into the kitchen, noticing Hermione as she quietly conversed with Winky as the little elf sat on the floor and sipped on a tiny tea cup.

Hermione turned at the sound of the kitchen door swinging and she smiled that smile that she reserved solely for him and made him very happy that he hadn't complained when he was roused from bed a little early.

"Ooh I wish you'd take to wearing your contacts more often Harry. I'll even research some spells that will let you keep them in all of the time, even when you are sleeping," Hermione offered with a cute blush staining her cheeks.

Harry merely chuckled in response, and he couldn't help himself when he gave her a quick kiss on the lips before he sat down. When Hermione was like this she was too cute.

After she lost some of her colour Hermione finally said, "I've managed to get Sirius to enchant a couple of wand activated portkeys so that we can get around today without having to travel too much."

Harry took a sip of his tea and closed his eyes as he savoured the rush of warmth running through him, "Exactly how are we supposed to avoid being seen popping up out of the blue?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Harry, portkeys usually have built in charms for proximity and privacy. Surely you don't think they are all like that silly boot we had to use to get the World Cup last summer?"

Harry shrugged as he reached over and grabbed a couple slices of toast and some orange marmalade. "It's just one of the many reasons why I need you around I reckon." Hermione arched her eyebrow but said nothing, as the remainder of breakfast passed in quiet companionship.

Hermione flicked her wand and the dishes stacked and levitated over to the sink, where Winky popped into place and began to doing dishes as she hummed a tune, which was some version of a house elf song if either of them had to guess.

Hermione pointed her wand at her mouth. "Purgo." Harry did the same and Hermione smiled appreciatively before she pulled a small

day planner from the pocket of her jacket. "Tap your wand on this with me, and we'll be off to our first stop of the day."

The pair landed in a small alley and both managed to keep their feet as Hermione placed the planner back into her pocket and took Harry's hand. "Come on love, the sooner we get there the better."

As they exited the alleyway Harry was taken aback by the old tower he could see, and Hermione had begun to bounce on her feet. "It's the Temple Church Harry!"

Harry vaguely remembered mentions of the church from various programs on the telly when he was younger in the Dursley household. He had made some brief forays into reading the general philosophies of most major religions in the past year, and while he didn't subscribe to any of them he knew Hermione did, at least casually.

As they moved closer to the church Harry finally asked, "Hermione, what is this all about?"

Hermione's smile seemed to dim for a moment before she replied, "I just want you to broaden your horizons. There is much more to the world than a struggle between good and evil, and I think you sometimes forget that."

Harry's eyes pinched a little at her statement, but he refrained from commenting as Hermione continued. "I'm not insinuating that you obsess over the war, but it weighs heavily on you and we both know the exact reason why. Just...trust me when I say this is my attempt at relieving your burden a little bit." Harry's stance relaxed some at this, and Hermione's smile returned as she dragged him towards the entrance of the church, a nearby message board indicated that Good Friday services were being held throughout the day.

After the pair was seated they watched as others slowly filled in the remainder of the seats, and the clergy man took his place behind the lectern.

Hermione leaned over to Harry and whispered, "The man at the lectern is the Master of the Temple. Temple Church has always been

a little different due to its history." Harry merely nodded as the man began to speak.

Harry listened intently as the priest described the story of Judas, Jesus, and the crucifixion followed by the resurrection. The man seemed to have an ease with drawing parallels between this tale and contemporary lifestyles. Harry found himself thinking about the contrasting sacrifices Judas and Jesus made, and he wondered what kind of sacrifices he would have to make before it was all over.

Hermione had made some progress on transferring his horcrux to an inanimate object, but the entire process was still in the planning stages and every day was a day closer for their hand to be forced by Voldemort.

As those attending slowly exited the church following the service Hermione leaned over and whispered, "This is the first of many stops for the day, so once we get back to the alley we are making our second stop."

As they moved into the alley Hermione canted her head and asked, "So what did you think of that?"

Harry shrugged, "It was certainly a different perspective than I'm used to, but it all seems to come back to Riddle."

Hermione nodded and stood on her toes, taking care to give Harry a soft kiss, just as the portkey activated, taking them on to their next destination.

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The Department of Mysteries contrasted the rest of the Ministry in many ways due to the variety of dangerous experiments taking place in its halls. In most cases, these experiments would eventually lead to some payoff for the various members of the wizarding community. However, there were cases where the decisions of various members cost the people of the wizarding world far more than they would ever know.

The first mistake had occurred back in 1943 when a fifth year Hogwarts student, and prospective future Unspeakable, had made a tour of the department and discovered the existence of an object called a horcrux. It would take parts of the next several years for the young wizard's research to expand to the creation of his own individual forms of the object, but the journey had started here.

Those at the top of the department did learn from the folly of their mistakes shortly after, when another prospective Unspeakable tried to make off with a time turner during a tour. Years later, they would further curse the folly of their actions, when it became obvious exactly what made it possible for Tom Riddle to survive a rebounded killing curse on a specific Halloween night.

As the department had begun to consolidate this information and slowly began the process of how to deal with it, one specific Unspeakable, a member of Voldemort's inner circle, was working on an assignment his specific skills made him singularly qualified for.

The vanishing cabinet that had been uncovered from Lucius Malfoy's personal stores of dark artifacts had been found to be a match for the one that old Borgin had in his possession on Knockturn Alley. The old man was sympathetic enough to the cause that he merely gave the cabinet away and it was carefully shrunk and placed in his possession.

Due to the nature of the experiments taking place in the department, separate wards covered this level of the Ministry building to ensure that a disaster in the department would not spread beyond the confines of the walls. Likewise there was one small gap in the wards off the main entrance of the department that allowed Unspeakables to portkey or apparate into the department and avoid being seen.

As he walked over to the area he glanced around before pulling the shrunk cabinet from his robes and placing a sticking charm on the top of it. A moment later he levitated the cabinet to the ceiling before he disillusioned it and reversed the shrinking charm. Making a pass over the area he was convinced that it would remain undetected until it was needed. His task completed he returned to the department. It

was difficult work engaging in active espionage in the department, and he would need his full focus on that task.

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As Hermione prepared to Floo back to Hogsmeade at the end of their little vacation from the war, she sat near the fire place with her legs crossed, thinking about her day long trip to broaden Harry's horizons. By the end of the day she had seen a lot of the more stubborn tension melt from his face and specifically his eyes. His posture had improved markedly, and he seemed to be smiling a bit more even as they discussed less pleasant things earlier in the morning.

Harry walked into the parlor room with Sirius; the pair was talking animatedly about something relating to the Wizengamot. Sirius smiled at Hermione and gave Harry a paternal hug, taking care to ruffle his godson's hair.

Harry walked over to Hermione and helped her to her feet, taking care to give her a deep kiss before he pulled away with a smile. Hermione's eyes were half closed, but the smallest feminine smile graced her face as she said, "What was that for?"

Harry grinned for a moment. "I need a reason to kiss you now?"

Hermione shook her head and glanced over to Sirius, who was watching with undisguised humor written all over his face. Huffing she walked over to the fireplace, looking at Sirius she stated, "You keep yourself out of trouble. I'll take care of tall, dark, and cheeky on my own time." With a wink she dropped her pouch of Floo powder and vanished in a swirl of emerald flame.

Harry walked over to the fireplace a moment later before giving Sirius a serious look. "Don't do anything stupid, you hear me you old mutt."

Sirius nodded and Harry dropped his pouch of Floo powder a moment later, his last words resonating with his godfather long after he was gone.

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Severus Snape felt an all too familiar fear creep back into his consciousness. Draco had been forced to take the Dark Mark and he had failed his godson. Now Draco would be forced to play the same game of hide and seek, and he had promised the boy that he would teach him Occlumency to protect his thoughts from the Dark Lord's constant forays into his servants' minds.

His own Dark Mark still burned constantly, but his own mental discipline in conjunction with imbibing the proper potions kept him from going mad. He knew that something big was on the horizon, and the Dark Lord never failed to have a rhyme to the madness of his sadistic evil.

To his surprise a voice called out from his personal quarters; quickly he walked into the room and put up his usual privacy spells. "Yes, Narcissa what can I help you with?"

Narcissa Malfoy's flawless face stared back through the green flames. "You are aware of Draco's new status then?"

Snape merely nodded as Narcissa continued, "He needs to protect his mind, and I fear that he is not nearly as committed to the Dark Lord as Lucius would hope him to be."

Snape winced. "I have...discussed this with Draco already. He can not escape his service behind the castle walls as I do, simply because when the summer comes he will be forced to leave." His shoulders slumped, "I already know what Dumbledore would ask of him if he was to be approached. I admit I myself am at a loss, but I will train the boy to protect his mind from the Dark Lord's attacks."

Narcissa's face shone with gratitude. "You do yourself a service by aiding Draco. I will not soon forget what you offer."

Snape nodded weakly as they said the cursory farewells before the fireplace once again went calm. He did not look forward to the task ahead of him.

Tonks looked over to her fellow Order member and auror partner Kingsley Shacklebolt and sighed heavily, she always hated standing guard over the stupid prophecy, even if guard duty had shifted since Harry had suggested setting a trap for Voldemort's forces.

After the massacre at the academy the remaining aurors were being leaned upon heavily, often resulting in double and triple shifts, with sleep becoming a more difficult thing to get. Provisional time turners made the rounds to keep the entire corps from dropping to exhaustion. Being Order members on top of everything else, meant that she and Kingsley were aging much faster than they would have liked. Of course, being a woman it brought along an additional series of complications. But she doubted Kingsley would want to hear that.

Kingsley glanced around and spoke in a low tone when it was obvious no one was around, "I keep hearing rumors that the Dark Lord's spies are even more numerous than once expected. How can the ministry stand up against an enemy that is so deeply embedded within its own ranks? Espionage is happening at a far more frequent rate, and I can't help but feel it's leading up to something big."

Tonks cracked a wry grin, "Thanks for that update old harbinger of doom. I should think it's obvious, he's preparing to muster his assault on the ministry to get the prophecy."

Kingsley shook his head, a stray ray of light catching his golden hoop earring perfectly, "If he only wanted the prophecy he would have made his move late at night when no one else is here."

Tonks suddenly looked very tired, and in her eyes she looked far older than her years, "I'm beginning to think Harry had the right of it, eventually we're going to have to take the war at you-know-who's forces and the bloody sympathizers. If we don't there won't be any of us left to react to these bloodbaths like what happened at the academy."

Kingsley furrowed his brow, "Potter certainly knows how to stir up a bee's nest."

Tonks snorted, "Seems to me a bunch of the older people in the order don't have much of a stomach for fighting back at this point. I can see why they're wary, even if I don't agree with it. People like McGonagall and Dumbledore have seen a lot of people they know die in these wars with dark wizards, and they don't want to see anyone else die, at the cost of fighting on the back of their heels."

Kingsley exhaled deeply closing his eyes, "Better to die actually fighting for something, than to live fighting for nothing."

Tonks reached over and patted the large man on the shoulder, "It's not very fun to think about, is it?" Kingsley smirked faintly, "Harry dressed Remus and I down after we discussed this exact same thing. While I don't think it's as bad as he says, I can't help but feel that he might actually have the right of it. Think about all of the Death Eaters who went Scot-free last time because they paid the right people enough Galleons. The good people in the wizarding world keep dying, and these Pureblood loonies are like cockroaches."

Kingsley opened his eyes and grinned wryly, "Happen to have a can of big spray then?"

Tonks rolled her eyes, "No, but I'm beginning to think Harry might have exactly that."

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A/N: Sorry about the long wait for this one folks, I haven't had much drive to type up the scenes as I've been tied up in writing some papers for my graduate courses. The next chapter should come along by the first week of May at the latest. Thanks to all of you that have read and reviewed.

Question of the chapter:

Now that the official announcement has been made that DH will be broken up into two movies; what are your thoughts about the content of the remainder of the films? Are they just trying to take a little bit more money from the fans of the series, or is it truly for creative reasons?

Disclaimer: It's JKR's not mine, if the lack of frivolous lawsuits wasn't proof enough the rest of the story should be.

A/N: My update schedule should slow down for a time as I get situated into my work schedule this summer. So sit back and enjoy as I set the table for a lot of action in the coming chapters.

Due to the extremely long wait for this chapter, note the upper A/N referencing summer...yikes. This is unbeta'd so any mistakes are mine and mine alone.

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The scribbling of quills and the occasional sigh were the only sounds that could be heard as the fifth year students at Hogwarts took the OWL examination in Arithmancy. All of the students save one were active participants in the class for the past three years, the exception being Harry Potter.

Harry scribbled on the spare piece of parchment provided as he worked out the equation that explained the mechanics of the cheering charm. He didn't believe Arithmancy solved all of the mysteries of magic like Hermione did at times, but he could see the utility in being able to break down a spell to see why it did or did not work. Whether it was due to the nature of the course, or something else Hermione had been the only Gryffindor to sign up for Arithmancy, and adding Harry into the mix still left a class filled predominantly with Ravenclaws, and a smattering of the brightest in the other houses.

The proctor from the ministry watched on with interest as the students scribbled endlessly and dipped their quills into inkwells intermittently. Due to the uncertainty of the war the education arm of the ministry had quietly moved the exam dates a couple of weeks up to ensure they would be completed free of as many distractions as possible.

Glancing over surreptitiously Harry had to suppress a sigh at the harried expression on Hermione's face as she was no doubt triple checking each and every answer she had given on the exam. Considering they had been revising for their OWL exams months in advance of anyone else, Harry had relaxed heading into the exams,

while Hermione seemed to go into overdrive to shorten her perceived deficit in knowledge.

With one last cursory glance over the entire exam Harry blew on the parchment to dry the most recent calculations, the exam had been challenging and he was certain he missed a few points, but he was also confident he would pull a good score. His eyes glanced around again before he raised his hand to have his finished exam taken by the proctor. He never noticed the pair of eyes from a specific Slytherin watching him in interest as well.

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Harry inhaled the cool Scottish air as he stared into the sky from his spot on the roof of the Astronomy tower. The OWL exams were flying by quickly, the number of days to the end of term dwindling just as rapidly. Whether it was by design or just a matter of the way the days fell, but this year they would have a one week gap between the end of the OWL exams and the train ride back to King's Cross.

Of course all of this paled in comparison to the inexplicable force pulling him towards his next meeting with Voldemort. He had always felt the slight change in the magic of his scar before his previous meetings with Voldemort, and not even his Occlumency could completely negate the overwhelming feeling of anticipation flooding across their link.

Knowing Voldemort it would involve some grand gesture of his Slytherin cunning to draw him away from Hogwarts. In all honesty, he would prefer his mortal enemy to have a lesser penchant for the dramatic but, he wryly thought that few people had that sort of choice offered to them.

He envied all of his friends and their burbling excitement over the end of another year at Hogwarts, and a summer free of homework as they awaited their OWL exams. Knowing all that he did now, he understood that the freedom of a simple life would have to wait until his destiny was fulfilled.

With a deep exhale he closed his eyes and shifted into his animagus form, the large feline melting into the shadows and back into the parody of normalcy that Hogwarts was slowly becoming.

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Delores Umbridge was counting down the days until she could get out of the stifling confines of Hogwarts, and make her triumphal return to the ministry to begin her attempts at currying favor with the newest Minister of Magic. Dumbledore had been gracious enough to let her take advantage of a break in her usual teaching schedule, due to the examinations for the fifth and seventh years, to return all of her various detritus to its proper place in her office at the ministry.

Sighing she stepped into her Floo, which for once was an open connection, as opposed to the regular inter-castle connection it was for most of the school year. Muttering a spell to protect her connection from less than savory types she carried her shrunken belongings into the green flames as she muttered, "Half-breed's hell."

As she stepped through the Floo connection in her office she never even noticed the proximity charm just above the Floo connection on her wall. With a flick of her wand her belongings slowly began to unpack, and she placed her most prized piece of the collection on her desk, an autographed photo of Gilderoy Lockhart posing next to her at a ministry function a few years back.

As she stretched out in her office chair, a knock on her door made her blink, "Yes?" She called out uncertainly; well aware that despite her high standing in the ministry she still had several enemies.

When no one answered she slid out of her chair with a squelching sound and waddled towards the door, her wand in hand. Tentatively she opened the door and darted her head out of her doorway, glancing both ways and not seeing anyone else. With a mental shrug she reached towards her door and a voice from her right hissed, "Imperio."

The voice murmured a command, "Wait until I tell you to close your door, and then close it and lock it with your strongest locking charm."

After the obligatory command was followed, without even a hint of mental fight Umbridge followed the voice's commands and sat back down into her seat.

Although there was no incantation, Barty Crouch Jr. slowly materialized after cancelling his disillusionment charm. The months since his master's return seemed to agree with the man, his aristocratic sandy blonde hair was neatly combed and his eyes weren't nearly as wild as they had been months ago.

Still, his manic personality made an appearance as he sneered, "Your caution appears to only extend to being suspicious of your fellow ministry drones Delores. No bother, I shall remedy your idiocy in short order."

Reaching into his cloak, he pulled a golden quill out and slid it across the desk, smirking he continued, "You will use your limited skills as a hag and enchant this quill as a portkey, I am well aware only the staff of Hogwarts can create portkeys to send students beyond the wards of the school. You will enchant the portkey to be a one way trip to the ministry atrium. Once again as a high ranking member of the ministry, this is within your power. On the day of the final OWL examination you will wait outside the room and wait for Harry Potter to finish his exam and exit the room. As soon as he is out of sight you will call for him and give him this quill, calling it an object of apology for your mistreatment of the boy earlier in the school year. Tell him it was once a Potter family heirloom, which should get him over his distrust for you. Key the bauble only to Potter's magical signature, which should prevent any untoward happenings. Upon completion of your task you are to flee to the top of the Astronomy tower and leap to your death. If you fail in this task, the dark lord will not forget your incompetence when he takes power."

Umbridge nodded placidly, and grabbed the quill into her chubby fingers. Barty closed his eyes and shuddered, it was as if he pulled pleasure from doing Voldemort's bidding. Finally he ordered, "Return to Hogwarts, and go about your typical business to avoid arousing suspicion. I shall see myself out."

Barty stood and seemingly glided over to the door, before he quietly slipped out the door, and once again engaged his disillusionment charm. His knowledge of the wards of the ministry thank to his years in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement still served him well, no one would ever be aware of his presence on this day until it was far too late to do something about it.

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"Listen up people; we are going to discuss something a little different today in honor of the fact that the OWL and NEWT exams are going on right now." Harry spoke over the various conversations taking place during the last defense study group meeting of the year.

Harry grinned at his various friends and students as they all stopped chattering, there were a lot more smiles around the castle since the exams were nearing their end in the next couple of days. "Today, we are going to talk about the people who can be just as big of a problem as death eaters and dark lord's, namely the Delores Umbridge's of the world."

Neville arched his eyebrow, "I don't know Harry, Umbridge and a death eater don't really seem to compare."

Harry's face became serious, "You all know about the death eaters who got off scot free at the end of Voldemort's first reign. They got off because of greedy, power grubbing purebloods, who viewed the end result of killing muggleborn as a minor crime. Never mind that several light oriented families were decimated, in the war, seeing as how the ones who have the power at the ministry don't play the light and dark game. They play for power, and cater to whoever has the power at the moment. What I am going to teach you today just might allow you to bypass the worst of these types if you are forced to take down a death eater. After all, what happens when you unmask them to find the face of a rich and powerful pureblood family staring back at you?"

Harry breathed deeply as the room provided a cushy armchair to sit in and he plopped down, "There are several obscure laws, which protect even the meekest of witches and wizards from the wrath of the ministry if such a situation should happen. Doubtless, you've all

read the Prophet and have heard about the blood feuds Bill Weasley and I declared over the Christmas holidays. This won't be an option for any of you aside from Neville, but you all have an option that the oldest of the purebloods would prefer you weren't aware of."

Ernie McMillan spoke up at this point, "Out with it Harry, don't play Dumbledore with what you know!"

Harry chuckled in response, "Oh, alright. The law you have to invoke is actually an ancient Hebrew bit of law, that all Magical Government's of the world included, to keep dark witches and wizards from walking all over the citizenry. If the ministry comes after you just claim go'el haddam, and you'll be exempt from any punishment as long as the death eater you've captured can be convicted as a murderer under the use of veritaserum."

Each of the members nodded thoughtfully as Harry glanced over to Hermione who nodded and pulled two shrunken crates from her pocket and flicked her wand to enlarge them back to their original size. The members of the study group blinked as Harry walked over to the crates and flicked his wand to pry the lids off of them.

"This is my little treat to all of you for doing such a great job this year, and committing your skills towards making our little world a better place. What you have here are specialized portkeys for you and your families should a large death eater attack takes place, and you can't possibly win. These portkeys will take you to an unplotable location and won't transport anyone with a dark mark, are under the imperius curse, or have any residue of the unforgivable curses on their persons. This was a tricky bit of spell work, and if you really want to know how it was done, take it up with Hermione after we are done her tonight. The other thing I'm giving you all, are basilisk hide pants and vests that have all been charmed to size to you once you put them on the first time. Don't worry about growth spurts, the suits will be keyed to you and you alone. These are the tools I'm giving you, as your friend and your leader."

Ron chose that moment to pipe up, "I don't like that look on your face mate, maybe you should tell us why you look like the grim right now."

Harry sighed and nodded, "Voldemort is on the verge of a very big move, whether it's on Hogwarts, the Ministry, or some unsuspecting muggle target. Keep your eyes and ears open people, and Merlin willing I'll see you all well at the end of the summer in some capacity. That's all I had planned for today, good luck with your exams, and stay safe."

.....

Rufus Scrimgeour read over yet another document on the impending doom on the main seat for magical government in his country. He had taken the helm of a rotted out empire, and all he could do was ride out the storm and protect as much as he could. Priceless artifacts had been removed from the Minister's personal vault for safekeeping, and the wards had been altered to sacrifice overall power for quick response and escape capabilities for those in on the escape plan.

The day before a dark mark had registered on the third floor somewhere near the administrative offices, but before the wards could further narrow down the owner of the mark, they had disappeared. Rufus could feel that telltale itch just under the surface of his skin, the same itch he always felt when something big was coming on the horizon. Whether he was gifted in divination, or could sense some obscure magical differences, he knew it was only a matter of time before he would be in France, with his exiled government and his hopes pinned on getting aid from other countries that had never been overtly friendly to the British ministry ever.

.....

Harry glanced around the great hall during breakfast on this morning, something was bothering him and from what he could tell it had nothing to do with Voldemort, but then again he had been wrong before.

Glancing across the table at Ron he sighed, "Every other day you've already eaten three plates of food at this point. We've studied the curriculum for this class from every direction, and you have a fair bit of next year's curriculum under your belt also. So, please don't play the wet blanket mate, you're going to do fine."

Ron grimaced, "Easy for you to say."

Harry bowed his head, thinking about how very little he wanted to deal with a whiny Ron right now, and to his relief a distraction in the form of Luna Lovegood appeared.

"Hello Ronald." Luna's lilting voice called out from about two inches behind him at his spot on the Gryffindor table.

Ron glanced over his shoulder and smiled slightly, "Lo' Luna."

Luna canted her head to the side, "I wished to help you get rid of your Nargles, but now I see that's not your problem at all. You seem to have been infected by a silly nilly of some sort. The treatment for Nargles is a snog, and all Silly Nillies respond to are hugs."

Ron ducked his head, but he was smiling as he spun on the bench and stood up, surprising Luna by initiating a hug. The Ravenclaw's face was mildly surprised, but when she smiled she really did look pretty, in a spacey kind of way.

Luna beamed a smile at Ron after he broke the hug, and she stood on her tiptoes to give him a quick kiss on the cheek, "Daddy always says an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That should protect you from Nargles for awhile. Come to me when you need some more help."

Luna skipped back to the Ravenclaw table and Ron sat down heavily, the other Gryffindors paying attention were all sharing amused smiles before the redhead began to pile food on his plate.

Hermione walked into the Great Hall at this point, she quirked an eyebrow as she watched Luna skip away before she sat down at her typical seat next to Harry and asked, "So what was that all about?"

Harry merely smirked, "Ron was getting an inoculation from Silly Nillies and some additional treatment to prevent a Nargle infestation."

Hermione rolled her eyes and looked over to Ginny for some support; the other girl merely shrugged her shoulders, although her eyes shone with mirth. As Hermione stole a muffin from Harry's plate, she sighed and filed it away for later consideration. For now, she had to do some last minute review for her Defense practical.

.....

Tofty smiled to himself in anticipation of what he assumed would be the most interesting practical exam he would be sitting this year. Of course, the transfiguration and charms exams had each had their own moments to be sure with the present crop of students. But now, he had Harry Potter, the Defense Against the Dark Arts wunderkind, working on what was widely acknowledged as his specialty.

A soft knock on the door to the exam room roused his attention before the door swung open revealing the same wizard he had been thinking on.

"Mr. Tofty? I'm here for my practical examination." Harry stated with confidence as he swung the door closed behind him.

Tofty waved his hand, "Yes do come in Mr. Potter, you still have a few moments until we can begin however. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions to pass the time?"

Harry arched his eyebrow but shook his head, "Not at all, sir."

Tofty smiled in anticipation before he spoke, "I've heard all about your comments in the Wizengamot meeting a few months back, and your use of a blood feud was simply inspired, Albus was surely involved in arranging it no doubt." Smiling he noticed that Harry was still waiting for a question, "Are you aware that while blood bigotry is a big issue, it isn't the only cause for the political situation we currently find ourselves in?"

Harry furrowed his brow, "Not to seem obtuse sir, but what do you mean exactly?"

Tofty smiled conspiratorially, "Have you ever taken an interest in British Muggle history?"

Harry was beginning to feel confused by the apparent change in topic but still answered, "I have a reasonable understanding."

Tofty nodded, "In short, several French pureblood families migrated to Britain during the French Revolution and immediately tried to bully their way into power. A couple of notable examples that you would recognize are the Malfoy and LeStrange families. That power struggle has shifted several times in the two centuries since the first French families migrated to Britain, and there still remains resentment on both sides of the equation. One of the foremost leading the call for Native born membership in the Wizengamot were your several times grandfather, Oliver Potter and Leonides Black. While it might appear that due to the current composition of the Wizengamot that they were unsuccessful I assure you they were anything but. The Malfoy and a couple of other less notable members were the only French families that petitioned for membership and were granted access. The reasons were more economic than anything else at that point in time."

In the distance the bell tolled signaling it was time to start the exam, "At any rate, I thought you should now that this current conflict is much more loaded than you might have otherwise believed. I suggest you take the time to research the topic in full, it might provide you with some profitable avenues to conduct the war on your own terms. But, for now we must begin the practical portion of your examination."

Harry flicked his wrist as his wand slid into place in his hand, "Whenever you are ready Professor Tofty."

Tofty nodded and flicked his own wand several dummies shimmering into view, "Very well Mr. Potter, first I would like to test your knowledge of spell selection in dealing with dark creatures, namely what spell should you try first if you come upon an aggressive vampire? Once you've made your selection cast upon that pale looking fellow nearest to you."

Harry merely smiled and nodded as he swirled his wand in the proper movement and he intoned, "Aduro flamen."

A cone of white flames was expelled from Harry's wand, encircling the appropriate dummy before they concentrated in an ever decreasing area, closing the cone slowly on the dummy.

Tofty looked quite impressed as he said, "Very impressive Mr. Potter, for highly capable witches and wizards that is indeed the spell to be used. Can you think of any other spells that less capable witches and wizards might use?"

Harry shrugged, "They could opt to either blind the vampire, or just escape by apparating or taking a portkey."

Tofty nodded and flicked his wand, an enchanted quill made a notation on a nearby piece of parchment. "Next, I would like you to cast the appropriate spell on a disarmed but physically superior opponent."

Harry complied with another piece of advanced magic; his spell work was much closer to NEWT level than to his OWL equivalents due to numerous hours spent working on spells that would be useful in a battle.

After twenty more minutes Tofty nodded, "Your grasp of Defensive Magic is quite impressive Mr. Potter. In fact, I would deign to say that if you attempted to gain credit for the NEWT equivalent you would at the very least earn an Exceeds Expectations for your mark."

The old wizard appeared to ponder something for a moment before he hesitantly asked, "I don't suppose you would be interested in a spot of extra credit at this point; would you Mr. Potter?"

Harry smiled in a bemused way, "What exactly would I need to do Professor Tofty?"

Tofty clapped his hands excitedly, in a way that reminded Harry of Professor Flitwick when a student did something advanced in class, "I've heard stories from some of my friends in other departments of

the ministry, something about a particularly powerful patronus charm?"

Harry smirked and silently flicked his wand, he had gotten down silent casting on the Patronus charm just in the past two weeks, and this would be the perfect chance to show off, just a little. The familiar nearly solid looking ethereal stage bound from his wand and walked over to Tofty sending Harry's mental message along, "Is this acceptable Professor?"

Tofty's eyes bugged out, not only at the silent casting of an exceedingly complex charm, but at the most solid Patronus charm he had ever seen in his 170 years of life. While it didn't happen often, there were times when an exam Proctor had the option of granting a student credit for both OWL and NEWT exams when they displayed mastery in a subject during their fifth year. In fact, if he had to think back to the last time it was done he would go back all of the way to the current Headmaster's Transfiguration OWL exam.

"Mr. Potter, I do believe that when you get your results back you will be most pleased that you put in all of the work you have. Well done, young man." Tofty nearly gushed.

Harry smiled and the little bit of tension he had been holding on to finally disappeared, absently he ran his hand down the disillusioned scabbard carrying Gryffindor's sword. That little surprise hadn't been necessary to spring on Tofty, and in a way he was glad for that. It never felt right using the sword for anything other than life or death situations, and he had even went to the extreme of having the Room of Requirements create a facsimile for his practice sessions.

Harry walked out of the room, Hermione, Neville, and Hannah Abbot were all sitting at a nearby bench, apparently waiting for him and he waved, "Hey guys, you'll never guess what just happened."

As Hermione was about to hazard a guess Professor Umbridge ran up to Harry with a golden quill in her hands, "Mr. Potter, I wanted to give you this quill as a token for having the best grade for the fifth year class."

Harry canted his head and glanced over to his friends who looked puzzled but hopeful before he shrugged and took the offered quill, it wasn't until he felt the all too familiar tug behind his navel when he mentally wondered; How many times am I going to fall for the old hidden portkey bit?

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At the ministry of magic things had just begun to hit the proverbial fan as death eaters had somehow found their way inside of the wards, and if that didn't make things bad enough, Minister Scrimgeour and several other high ranking members of the ministry had seemingly disappeared. While this little fact didn't affect the crisis management protocols that had been instated several months earlier, it did at to the sudden sense that the rug was being pulled out from underneath the loyal ministry employees finding themselves in a fight for their lives.

Due to the unexpected nature of the attack the death eaters had taken control of over 1/3 of the building before a counter attack could be mounted. By the time the counter attack had happened the death eaters had already taken the best positions of defense in the building, the few remaining followers of the dark lord that hadn't been purged quickly joined their comrades and the battle was quickly becoming a losing one for the ministry.

William Hardison was one of those lucky employees that were included in the ministry evacuation plans due to his important skills as an obliviator. However, while he had every intention of taking his emergency portkey to the appointed destination he had no plans to do so before he could save as many of his friends as he could.

His little group was fighting their way to the safety of the Floo connections in the atrium; he had seen good friends captured by the deatheaters and he had seen a couple of them take the dreaded green of the killing curse. He would grieve their deaths later, for now he would concentrate on getting everyone else out alive. They had reached the last antechamber before reaching the atrium and now they were trading spells with some of the notorious deatheaters, the

ones who didn't even bother trying to protect their identity by wearing the mask.

Bellatrix LeStrange was a whirling dervish in a fight, in fact during the first war the witch had been responsible for the deaths of more aurors than any other witch or wizard alive. The dark lord didn't kill aurors; rather he saved his venom for those that fought him out of choice rather than due to vocation.

William sighed and glanced over to his friends, "Unless we rush her, we aren't getting out of this room alive."

There were murmurs of agreement when the door Bellatrix was guarding slammed open revealing a masked deatheater who murmured something as he waved his hands urgently. Bellatrix snarled and flicked her wand; a wall of blue fire now divided the room, blocking Will and his friends from the atrium.

Bellatrix stormed from the room into the atrium, off to cause mayhem and murder somewhere else in the ministry no doubt.

Will glanced at the others and gave them a rueful smile, "Well, any ideas how to make it through a wall of fire?"

Thankfully, one of the nondescript members of the group was an unspeakable, "Well, considering the vast majority of magical fires can just be put out with a water spell and finite combination we should try that first. I highly doubt even a witch of LeStrange's caliber could conjure of Fiendfyre silently and control it so seamlessly."

Will nodded and sighed with relief, it seemed this was where he would have to leave his friends behind, "Ok, I have an emergency portkey that will get me clear of the wards so let's hope the water/finite combination will work because I can stay behind and cast as you all get out and to the Floo connections."

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Harry tumbled to the ground, his feline sense of balance allowing a seamless landing, and his hard earned experience with portkeys

putting his head on a swivel as he landed. Immediately he knew exactly where he was, the statue was a dead giveaway that he was in the atrium at the Ministry of Magic.

Of course the fountain connected to the statue had been blown out at some point leading to water intermingling with blood on the floor as bodies were strewn about throughout the room. Regardless of how long this apparent attack on the ministry had been ongoing, the fighting appeared to have moved elsewhere as the room was completely clear of active participants. Harry sighed and shook his head, sure he could find a shadow somewhere and sneak out, but he couldn't leave people to die without doing something.

As he stepped forward towards the nearest door with wand in hand and sword on his back, Harry was certain that he was somehow playing into yet another of Riddle's convoluted plots. But, unlike in the past he was well aware of what he was getting himself into and he still was going to move forward, or at least he hoped so.

A/N: Well, I hope the wait was worth it for those of you that have stuck with me over the long delay. If you catch any big mistakes feel free to mention them in the review. I didn't send this to beta to get it out that much quicker for all of you. November should give me more time to write and hopefully I'll be able to wrap this chapter in the Open Your Eyes series up.

Next chapter we have Harry picking his way through even more death and mayhem, and in Hogwarts things get crazy.

Question of the Chapter:

There are several genres of Harry Potter fan fiction out there, what genre do you think has been the most neglected and why? For example, the Harry in Azkaban genre hasn't been done enough because...

Disclaimer: It's JKR's little world, and I think that at this point it should be fairly obvious that I am not her.

A/N: Ok, this is the first of two parts detailing the fall of the ministry, Harry's annual meeting with Voldemort and his Death Eaters, and how wizarding Britain hunkers down in a time of revolution.

Also, I've gotten a few reviews lately complaining about continuity errors in this one and the prequel. The errors that were pointed out weren't actually continuity errors, but I imagine I have slipped up at some point during the series. Anyone who can give me a continuity error that has bugged them, including the chapter of original notice and the chapter of the error, will be mentioned next chapter in my author's note for their hard work.

Once again this chapter is unbeta'ed so any errors you see are solely my fault.

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"Actions are the seeds of fate deeds grow into destiny."

~Harry S. Truman

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As soon as Harry vanished, the three students there to witness it had sprung into action, although Hermione was the fastest as her wand lit up with the familiar red of a stunning spell. If the look on her face was any indication she would have preferred a spell that caused a bit more damage.

Neville groaned, "Bloody hell."

Hannah swatted Neville upside the head and ordered, "You're the fastest here Neville, go grab a professor and tell them to contact the headmaster about what happened."

Neville took off like a shot, any lingering images of the inept pudgy boy he was in the past vanishing nearly as quickly as he did. Hannah

looked over at the enraged Gryffindor girl and asked, "So, what's the plan then Hermione?"

Hermione exhaled deeply and closed her eyes, "I'm so bloody tired of this nonsense always happening to Harry. The worst part is that it isn't even his fault; it's that sheep bugging idiot of a dark lord and his mentally challenged followers. How stupid can these people possibly be, preaching pureblood supremacy with a leader who is basically the child of a squib and a muggle?"

Hannah couldn't suppress the small giggle from escaping her lips before she responded to the malicious glare that came her way, "I'm sorry, but honestly, sheep bugging idiot?"

Hermione's scowl softened a little, but it never challenged becoming a smile as she glared over at Umbridge, "Honestly, I swear this country is ass backwards in respect to all of its magical traditions. Let's give the rights to the purebloods who abuse everyone else, while we take them away from the majority of the population that is routinely oppressed, either by dark lords or nice politicians like Delores Umbridge."

Hannah wisely decided to remain silent as Hermione spewed some colorful insults about most every pureblood bigot she could think of. Finally, when it appeared she was running out of names to insult Neville returned breathing heavily with both Dumbledore and McGonagall close behind.

Dumbledore didn't waste any time simply asking, "What exactly happened Ms. Granger?"

Hermione sighed dejectedly, "Harry was leaving the exam room and spotted us, we had decided to wait for him to discuss the exam considering we've all finished up now. Umbridge walked up to Harry talking about giving Harry a quill for being the top student in her class, and as he took it somewhat begrudgingly he disappeared because the quill was a portkey. I stunned Umbridge and Hannah sent Neville looking for a professor."

Dumbledore nodded and flicked his wand, levitating the still-stunned Umbridge and he smiled in thanks to Neville and Hannah, "Thank you very much for your aid Ms. Abbot and Mr. Longbottom. I will aware the appropriate points once we uncover a bit more about Professor Umbridge's actions. For now we must depart to my office for a most interesting interrogation of sorts." Turning to McGonagall, Dumbledore added, "Minerva please gather Severus, Pomona, Filius, and Hagrid to my office. If my suspicions prove correct I will need all of you present."

As the group headed down the hall Dumbledore turned to Hermione and calmly asked, "Ms. Granger if I may impose on you, please gather the rest of the prefects and head students and come to my office. The interrogation should be complete by the time when you shall arrive. I shall of course fill all of you in on the specifics."

Hermione grudgingly took off towards Gryffindor tower, and Dumbledore sighed in relief as he was aware how narrowly he avoided an ugly scene of some sort.

Hermione took a steep left before entering the Gryffindor common room, the head girl's personal quarters were just down the hall and from there it would be much easier to organize the rest of the prefects.

Knocking on the door impatiently she sighed with relief when the door opened up revealing Patricia Stimpson, "Hello Hermione, have you come for a chat now that exams are finished? I'm surprised you aren't celebrating proper with Harry."

Hermione shook her head, "There has been a bit of a bother and I need you to contact Cedric and the rest of the prefects and meet me outside the headmaster's office in 15 minutes."

Patricia nodded and went into her room to activate the summoning sphere that both head students were given to call an emergency meeting. As she activated the sphere the prefect badges within the school wards registered the command, and the meeting place was likewise communicated by simple expedient of Patricia's thoughts, much like someone would send a message via a patronus charm.

Patricia sighed, "I have to throw on some proper robes for this, so I'll see you there in 15 minutes."

As the door closed in her face Hermione sighed heavily before she exhaled a deep breath and began the walk to Dumbledore's guardian outside of his office.

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Inside Dumbledore's office a very tense interrogation was taking place at that very moment, "Delores are you an agent of Lord Voldemort's?"

One of the most valuable aspects of veritaserum was that it overpowered the subliminal mental commands of any spells due to how it directly interacted with the magic of a witch or wizard.

Delores Umbridge unblinkingly replied, "The dark lord has many admirable goals, but he is responsible for the ending of too many pureblood lines to be followed."

Dumbledore grimaced, as much as he'd like to deny it, Umbridge's views were in line with a very high portion of the Wizengamot and it had caused him more than one headache in his years as a part of the body.

Snape continued the interrogation, "Why did you give Potter the portkey?"

Umbridge replied in the same monotone, "I was placed under the Imperius by Barty Crouch Jr., I never saw his face, but his voice was familiar to me. He ordered me to create a portkey that would take Potter to the Ministry atrium."

Dumbledore's eyes narrowed in thought before he walked over to his fireplace and tossed a pinch of Floo powder in the fireplace and clearly said, "Ministry atrium." Instead of the telltale swirl of emerald flame that signified an open and functioning connection, a brief flame fizzled before going out.

Dumbledore nodded to himself once in affirmation before he turned to McGonagall, "Minerva, execute emergency shut down order tango. The prefects and head students should be waiting for you just outside the gargoyles."

McGonagall nodded once and made her way down the stairs out of the office, following protocol to a tee, it was one reason she made such a solid second in command.

Dumbledore turned to Snape, "Prepare your potion stores and ingredients closet for transfer as we discussed Severus."

Next he turned to Sprout, "Pomona, you know what to do in regards to your greenhouse."

Finally he turned to Flitwick, "Filius please join with Madam Pince to charm the necessary tomes and send them on to their final destination."

Dumbledore closed his eyes deep in concentration, connecting his mind directly to the wards of the school, and allowing his thoughts to be transferred across the school, "Students please go to your common rooms and follow the instructions of your house prefects and the head students."

Next he turned to the now lucid Umbridge and stated, "Delores, you have been placed under the imperius curse to complete a task and I do believe Voldemort has chosen today to make his move on the Ministry. If you have a safe place to escape to, I suggest you do so before I put the castle into lockdown. The Floo system should only be used if no other option exists. Do you understand?"

Umbridge nodded shakily and rose to her feet before exiting Dumbledore's office as the others had. Slowly he turned to Fawkes and gave his friend a rueful grin, "You know what you must do my friend. Aid Harry in any way you can. I shall tend to the castle, you will know where to meet me at."

The phoenix bobbed its head and trilled once before vanishing in a flash of fire, Dumbledore flicked his gnarled wand once and his office

began to pack itself before he walked out the entrance on his way to the great hall, there was much to be done.

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"Avada Kedavra." The squat lumpy witch hissed as Harry rolled out of the way of the curse. He had already aided twenty injured ministry employees when he came upon three unmasked Death Eaters, which was a dead giveaway they were inner circle members. Thinking back on his various history lessons he recognized two of them as the Carrows, and the other could be Jugson.

Harry merely grinned and flicked his wand, sending out a silent explosion hex in response to yet another unforgivable curse cast at him.

Jugson grunted as he cast a shield charm which absorbed the brunt of the spell, blasting him back several feet as he slid from the force of the spell.

The running spellfire fight had taken the four through the shattered remains of the Department of Magical Cooperation. The various cubicles now resembled some sort of post-apocalyptic blast, or a very wild office Christmas party.

Harry had taken cover behind a large pile of rubble and an overturned desk and he yelled to the panting Death Eaters, "So what is old Tom planning today, an obscure ritual to cure impotence?"

A wheezing voice replied, "The Dark Lord will build his empire on the bones of his enemies Potter. But, first I think he'll enjoy taking you apart piece by piece." One of the large drawbacks of the unforgivable curses was the amount of energy, in addition to a sizable magic output required to cast them. A young and fit wizard like Harry hadn't even broken a sweat during the fight casting his powerful but practical spells while the older witches and wizards were grasping for any hidden reserves of energy they could find during the lull in the action.

Harry ran his hand down the length of the sword strapped to his back before he pulled it out and slowly rose, his head on a swivel to

prevent being flanked. Seeing the three Death Eaters still recovering from their exertion Harry trotted out of the room, looking for a defensive edge as he worked the circuit around the building. It came as a surprise when he realized he was just outside the public entrance to the Department of Mysteries. It had been a few months since his late night journey to the department under his invisibility cloak with the aid of Fawkes in switching out the real prophecy with a fake one meant for Voldemort.

While the three Death Eaters had been casting fatal curses at him the entirety of their fire fight, Harry had to acknowledge it was seemingly a half hearted effort on the part of three inner circle members. In fact, it was more like they were herding him in a certain direction...

Harry rolled his eyes at Riddle's flair for the dramatic; of course the dark wizard would want him there for when he finally heard the prophecy. With the knowledge that he could escape any kind of trap Riddle had for him using his shadow walking abilities, Harry sheathed his sword and tapped his wand on his head as he disillusioned himself before transforming into the large feline and disappearing into the nearest shadow, he would scope things out before he would make an appearance in the Department of Mysteries.

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As the staff scattered, Hermione waited outside of the gargoyle, intent on getting answers from the headmaster. A few moments later Dumbledore strode down the stairs and acknowledged her with a nod, "Without going into excessive detail, it would be plain to say that Harry has been sent to the ministry of magic during Tom's takeover. I have every confidence that Harry will do everything he can before he makes his escape."

Hermione took little solace from Dumbledore's words, but she had the utmost belief in Harry's abilities so she hadn't been looking for reassurance as much as information. "So, the ministry is beyond being saved then?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily, "For the moment, the ministry building and its vast resources are lost to us, but the government itself will not

fall. Rufus, for all of his faults is still capable of making the tough decisions that Cornelius never wanted to."

Hermione merely nodded, "I need to go to the Gryffindor common room to get everyone prepared to leave."

Dumbledore reached into a robe pocket and looked at his watch, "I dare say you won't have more than 45 minutes to get everyone packed and down to the great hall, so I will leave you to it."

As Hermione darted away Dumbledore rubbed his face tiredly, there was much to do and a little amount of time in which to do it.

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Rufus Scrimgeour was feeling decidedly disgruntled as he looked around the tiny office, the muggle British consulate in Paris had arranged for the entirety of the functioning ministry of magic to be placed a small portion of a mostly empty office building.

The remaining ministry employees had done the requisite muggle repelling wards and the building had slowly begun to settle into a watch and see mentality about what was happening in their homeland. Roughly 70 percent of the remaining aurors and unspeakables had passed loyalty questioning and the various administrators deemed loyal had also been portkeyed away at the first sign of invasion by Voldemort's forces.

The diplomatic specialists of the ministry had already been dispatched to what could be considered, "potential" allies amongst the other magical governments, Barty Crouch Sr. had been one of those not considered loyal enough to include in the evacuation plans. Having department heads connected to Death Eaters in any way was not something the exiled ministry could afford, and he had been a casualty of war in a manner of speaking.

As a knock on the door broke him from his musings he gruffly said, "The door is unlocked."

The door slowly opened to reveal Amelia Bones, Will Hardison, and a few of the senior aurors and unspeakables entered the room levitating a large board of some sort, he immediately recognized as one of the primary monitoring panels that detected certain frowned upon spells across Britain.

Rufus rubbed his aching knee for a moment before he asked, "What is this all about Amelia?"

Amelia simply replied, "We haven't much to do at the moment, so we decided to keep an eye on activity in Britain. Dumbledore will be in contact with us once Hogwarts is evacuated and locked down, and then we can begin planning the best means of slowly retaking the country from the terrorists. Madam Marchbanks was kind enough to loan us one of her monitoring boards, and a few of her staff charmed the board to take note of both portkey movement, and unforgivable curse usage. As you can see London is being lit up like a muggle Christmas tree at the moment."

Rufus grunted in acknowledgement as the various people began to set up a command post of sorts in his office, anything was better than just sitting around and waiting for the world to burn around him.

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Harry had discovered several effective uses for his animagus form in the months since he was first able to transform. His sense of smell, balance, and vision at night were unquestionably better, and as time progressed he noticed similar improvements in his human form as time passed. His glasses and their prescription were so mild now; if his eyesight continued to improve he figured they would be unnecessary by the end of the summer if not sooner.

However, while these improvements were all valuable in their own right, his ability to walk through shadows was easily the most important from a tactical point of view. He had learned intricacies in observing others from the shadows that allowed him to act as he was at the moment, mere feet away from Voldemort and who was seemingly no wiser to it.

There were 12 Death Eaters present, none with their masks on, meaning these were the inner circle that he had heard of, and battled against in varying quantities. From several feet away the sound of heavy foot steps signaled an approach, but by the relaxed and expectant looks on the faces present they knew it was no threat coming towards them. Riddle had the fake prophecy orb in his hand, waiting for something obviously, and knowing Voldemort he wanted to unveil it in front of Harry to terrify him before killing him.

Finally, the footsteps stopped as Jugson and the Carrows came around a shelf, looking positively green for some reason.

Voldemort decided he didn't want to beat around the bush as he snarled, "Why do you not have the boy with you?"

Amycus Carrow tried to answer in an even voice, "We drove him right to the entrance my lord, but he has seemingly disappeared. He may have carried an additional portkey supplied by the muggle loving fool Dumbledore."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes in concentration and reached out for the link he was aware he held with the young wizard. As it had been for the most part over the past year, the connection was mostly muffled, but he could since the boy was near.

"The connection I share with the boy would seem to indicate he is still in the vicinity. Go back and complete a thorough search near the entrance, he is very skilled in evasion techniques and you should search for foreign magical traces for a sign of him." Voldemort ordered after a moment of thought.

Jugson and the Carrows nodded in acceptance and took off at a fast walk to avoid any chance of their lord's wrath.

Harry knew then and there that he would need to have the piece of soul in his scar removed before he could ever win the war. It was too great of a liability that his enemy could have a rough idea of his location at any given time.

It also disconcerted him to know that his shadow location could be somewhat discerned through the link he shared with the self-appointed dark lord. Weighing his options Harry figured he could pull off killing one of the inner circle members without anyone figuring it out. Then he would make his appearance and listen to the fake prophecy before making his escape, preparing for the war and its eventual conclusion.

As Harry eyed his target he pondered for a moment the sacrifices he was making to win the war, but shrugged them away in light of the importance of his next few minutes. There was a time and a place to wax philosophical, and this was neither the time nor the place.

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Albus Dumbledore had lived for a very long time, and most of the moments in his long life held little enough significance to be remembered beyond vague recollections. What he was about to say however, he had a feeling it would stick with him until the very day he died and the beyond into the next great adventure.

The great hall was filled with a cacophony of noise as each and every student had been put into lines based upon house with all of their belongings/familiars with them. The heads of houses were keeping the lines mostly orderly as prefects and the head students also helped where they could. Many unusual sights could be seen, such as fifth year Gryffindor prefect Hermione Granger was sporting a steely glare that put Professor McGonagall's worst to shame.

Dumbledore raised his wand and a cannon like shot filled the hall, quieting the students immediately, "Thank you for your cooperation in preparing to leave for the term. This has become necessary because Lord Voldemort has attacked the ministry of magic in an attempt to take power."

Gasps sounded throughout the hall and Dumbledore waited for a moment before continuing, "Some of you might already be aware of this, but I assure you all right here and now, that Hogwarts will not suffer the same fate. I have arranged for portkeys to take each of you to your parent's homes using an obscure branch of magic. Stay in

your lines and your head of house will aid you in making the safe journey. Stay safe, and it is my hope that Hogwarts will open again, some day very soon."

As the first students began to disappear via portkey Hermione tracked down the old wizard and pointedly asked, "Do you have anyone in the ministry right now?"

Dumbledore flicked his wand creating a privacy ward before he answered, "Aside from Harry, the only other Order member unaccounted for is Kingsley."

Hermione frowned thoughtfully absently pulling her bushy hair into a pony tail and tying it off before she stated, "The less people who can be used as hostages against Harry the better. Kingsley is a competent auror; hopefully he isn't caught by Death Eaters."

Dumbledore didn't know exactly how to respond to a 16 year-old witch discussing matters of war with him like he was an inexperienced babe. Granted he'd made his share of mistakes in dealing with Tom over the years, but he knew more about the wizard than any other man alive. Finally, he settled on a mild rebuke, "As of the last report I received Kingsley was only aiding others in escaping from the ministry, he was not actively engaging the enemy Ms, Granger. While I appreciate your concern over Harry, I would prefer if you found a more constructive outlet than to criticize our efforts."

Hermione looked at Dumbledore for a long moment, seemingly assessing what the older wizard had said before she nodded to herself and walked away without another word. Dumbledore suddenly felt very disconcerted, like he had thrown a life line away at a time when he really could have used one. However, before he could dwell on it any further Fawkes flashed into the great hall looking rather sorrowful for a phoenix.

Hermione meanwhile walked over to the nearest member of the defense study group, Susan Bones, and quietly asked, "Do you have everything you might need?"

Susan took a deep shuddering breath before she confided to Hermione, "My auntie probably won't be at our manor when I get there. She mentioned something about plans if the ministry building was attacked."

Hermione merely nodded, "If you need to, use that emergency portkey and come to the safe house we have set up. I'm sure Dumbledore can get you in touch with your aunt."

"Thanks....I...well I'll do that unless auntie leaves instructions otherwise." Susan managed, looking rather relieved.

Hermione continued to wander around, talking to all of the younger students, trying to calm several of them down, also making suggestions to the various study group members she happened upon. She needed to keep her mind on the things she could work on, and not on Harry being in danger once again.

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Harry sat in the shadows and listened to Voldemort talk, a plan began to form in his mind about how he could make the most of this opportunity. He was in a room with 12 inner circle members and Voldemort, and there were 3 more inner circle members outside of the department of mysteries searching for a hint of him. Thinking his odds were better against 3 as opposed to 13 he melted back into the shadows to make his first significant contribution of this battle.

Harry found his prey spread out near the entrance of the Department of Mysteries, feverishly looking for a magical trace of said wizard. That small part of him that still clung to his innocence railed against having to follow this course of action, but it was quickly ignored in favor of the large part of him that was more concerned with winning the war and surviving it.

He moved over to Jugson's position, the Carrows both had their backs turned to their fellow Death Eater and Harry struck quickly and silently, surging out of the shadows he ripped out Jugson's throat still in his animagus form before quickly transforming and silencing the man's last gurgles through his ruined throat.

Harry raised his wand and selected Alecko Carrows for his next strike; nearly inaudibly he aimed and murmured, "Percrutio." An orange beam of magic lanced out, and neatly drilled a hole through the middle of the Death Eater's forehead; she began to flow slowly to the ground having lost enough gray material to ensure she wouldn't be torturing muggles any time soon.

As if the last two standing were wading through treacle they spun to face each other, the squat lumpy looking wizard slashed his wand down, and Harry corkscrewed his wand using a silent exploding hex. Harry dodged the chartreuse colored spell and watched in mingled fascination and horror as Amicus Carrow lost his right shoulder, neck and everything attached to it in a spray of blood, bone, and other materials.

In all the entire attack took less than fifteen seconds and yet to Harry it felt like an eternity as he launched the pre-emptive attack reducing Voldemort's inner circle by three members. The last spell had resulted in a spray of blood that went everywhere, including some that ended up on his face as he breathed through his nose trying to slow his heart and respiration.

A bit of bile had begun to rise in his throat, but he squelched it ruthlessly, he still had some more work to be done. He could get sick later, when his plans and life weren't on the line. Wandlessly he waved his hand over his face, cleaning the gore away before he walked into the front door of the Department of Mysteries.

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As the students continued to disappear from the Great Hall, Hermione moved on to her next target, "Ron, have you heard what happened to Harry?"

Ron grimaced and nodded, "Yeah, Neville told us all about it while he packed. By the way, where is Neville going to take his portkey to? With his gran gone, he doesn't really have any more family, does he?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, "While tactless as usual Ron, you do bring up a good point. But, I was already aware that Neville is going to be joining us at headquarters this summer, so you'll be seeing plenty of him soon enough." Her eyes softened slightly, "How is your mother doing?"

Ron shrugged helplessly, "She's been cooking and sewing as much as she can, but according Bill she looks like she's lost something and has no idea how to find it."

Hermione nodded sympathetically as she patted Ron's hand, "Make sure Ginny and the twins take their portkeys when they're supposed to. When Harry gets back from the ministry, we'll conduct an inventory and start devising a plan of what we are going to do. I have a feeling things are going to come to a head in more than one way in the next couple of days."

Ron rubbed at his face tiredly and lamely wisecracked to Seamus, "And I thought the OWL exams were tough."

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Harry walked into the Department of Mysteries, trying to look unperturbed, and in all honesty still feeling slightly numb from his killings a few moments earlier.

As he approached a few of the inner circle members could finally see him, and pointed his presence out to the dark lord.

Voldemort looked as dangerous as he had the previous year in the graveyard, but seemed to be much more in control than he had then. He didn't look like he was taking Harry for granted however, and in that at least Harry felt a small measure of perverse pleasure.

"Hey it's Tom, and his entire merry band have joined him it appears. I've suddenly got the feeling that you've been waiting for me." Harry stated lightly, even though his grip on his wand had tightened noticeably.

Voldemort motioned with his hand and the inner circle all assembled behind him, the prophecy orb was resting in his palm. "Hello Harry, normally I would kill those that dare call me by my miserable father's name, but given your talents I'll allow it."

Harry smirked and bowed mockingly in reply, "I appreciate your generosity Tom. So, what dastardly plot have you hatched for me today?"

Voldemort chided in response, "My word Harry, such an ego you have to think you are the centerpiece of my glorious plans. You are here today merely as an observer to my greatness, and the unveiling of my destiny as ruler of the world." Thrusting his hand upward he intoned, "Behold the prophecy, which was the bane of my existence for many years as I was no more than a pale shadow of my greatness, and now watch as it becomes the heralding of my new world."

Harry narrowed his eyes, even though he was positive the real prophecy had been destroyed months ago, he wondered what Riddle would make of the new one he and Dumbledore had put together to keep the dark wizard guessing.

Tapping his wand on the orb it slowly opened revealing the familiar scene of an ethereal Sybil Trelawney:

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ...
Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ...

A/N: The rest of the prophecy will be the start of next chapter. I don't typically leave all of you with cliffhangers, but it was a good time to take a breather. Next chapter will provide you with more answers, a few new questions, and some set up as to what effect Voldemort's actions will have on the rest of the world.

Next chapter should hopefully be out by the end of the month, and the final chapter in this story should be out before Christmas sometime, earlier if I can get the time. Thanks for reading and thanks for the reviews.

Question of the chapter:

The new trailer for HBP was released a couple of days ago, what one part of the trailer are you most looking forward to seeing on the big screen?

Disclaimer: It's JKR's world, not mine. But at this point the plot itself will mostly be mine, even if all of the parts moving around are still hers.

A/N: Big happenings this chapter, and thanks to my anonymous reviewerYofofor catching a continuity error. No beta, so all mistakes are once again solely my errors alone. This wraps up this story, with OYE: Year 6, coming eventually.

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Tapping his wand on the orb it slowly opened revealing the familiar scene of an ethereal Sybil Trelawney:

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ...
Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...

.....

"Thrice the dark lord might sway him when revealed, ere the boy becomes a man and then one shall defeat the other. For neither can live while the other survives unless they unite."

Harry buried himself behind his Occlumency barriers, feeling elated that one of his plans was coming to fruition now. The feeling was quickly replaced by the constant hum in his ears he now attached to dangerous situations. He half wondered somewhere in the back of his mind if this was what Dumbledore or Voldemort felt when completing an elaborate scheme, but squashed it because he wasn't harming anyone else with his plans, or at least that was what he told himself in the past. Of course, those concerns were ancillary to being surrounded by the largest concentration of powerful dark wizards in the world mere feet away.

Voldemort's red eyes burned with fury and more than a small measure of malice, the dark lord seethed in his mind.

So Potter was in essence untouchable until he became an adult.

Thankfully, in terms of magic this was an easily measurable age, when the boy turned 17 he became a man, and he could be killed. Suddenly it explained his inexplicable defeats over the past 14 years, and instead of making him fallible it gave him context for his defeats. Even he, the great Lord Voldemort, could not defeat fate, it appeared.

Harry glanced around deciding he really had nothing else to accomplish at this point. Having saved a few ministry employees and activating the fake prophecy he had no other plans or contingencies worth staying within shouting range of so many psychopaths and murderers, he was funny in that way. Glancing around at the 13 hardened killers he half wondered, why he had decided to even bother with the fake prophecy. No use in crying over spilled milk now, he could save the self-recriminations for later.

"Well...now that we've taken care of our business for the day, I think I'll be leaving for now." Harry stated with a half bow as he made to exit the circle of death eaters and Voldemort surrounding him, selecting Rabastan LeStrange to push his way through.

As Harry made to leave Voldemort gathered himself in the face of the revelations of the prophecy, "Nonsense Harry, we've just begun to have fun today; think of it as a recruitment visit."

Harry rolled his eyes and glanced straight into the eyes of Rabastan LeStrange, "I don't suppose you'll move if I say please, will you?"

LeStrange didn't even react and Harry turned to Voldemort, "I'm actually busy today Tom, perhaps we can reschedule for some time later."

Voldemort opened his mouth to reply when Harry made his move, slamming his palm into LeStrange's solar plexus, doubling the man over as he sprinted past. Voldemort finally reacted and hissed, "Stop the boy from escaping."

Harry darted towards a shadowed corner, transforming instantaneously as he melted into the shadow, disappearing amidst an infuriated hiss from Voldemort. After a moment of complete silence, the dark lord stated, "Initiate the final phase of the plan, you

all know what you need to do. Close down the borders to all magical travel, which should stop all but the muggleborns from escaping long enough to institute our other measures. Bella, I expect you to retrieve everything of value from Gringott's before the goblins can scurry fully back into their holes."

Voldemort furrowed his brow pondering how Potter could have escaped; he saw the transformation and the boy's disappearing act into the shadows. His study of darker magical creatures in his earlier years led him to one possible creature; Potter was a Twilight Panther animagus. There were ways around the mythical abilities of the Twilight Panther; otherwise the creature would have long ago controlled an entire continent, and he wouldn't be a very good dark lord if he didn't know how to control dark creatures.

His inner circle had fanned out, each of them leaving the prophecy room to begin the laborious process of creating his puppet government, using the ministry building as his base of operations. The prophecy didn't change much in his plans, aside from knowing now that Potter would be the last step between him and ultimate victory.

As he prepared for his own personal mission two of his lesser followers brought a prisoner to him, the delicious irony of this prisoner meant he would get to his other plans. "Hello Bartemius, have you seen your boy lately?"

Barty Crouch Sr. slumped to his knees in defeat, all of his political gambits; all of his vaunted intelligence and ability were going to come to a bitter end right now. Scrimgeour had abandoned him to this fate because he couldn't be trusted with his obvious ambitions driving him, and he was a political liability, his own son being an inner circle member of Voldemort's Death Eaters.

Crouch closed his eyes as Voldemort brandished his wand like a surgical instrument; the one thought reverberating through his mind was soon to be reality, as the pain started.

"Let's start with the eyes Bartemius; I'll save the fun body parts for when Junior comes back." Voldemort said in a silky tone as the room

filled with screams. The simple pleasures of torturing for sport were clearly underrated by all of those who had never experienced it.

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Harry materialized from a shadow outside of the parlor room at Grimmauld Place; the transformation back and forth was pretty much instantaneous now. The fact that he was clear of danger now seemed to fully hit him all at once as his heart beat began to hammer in ears so loudly he could hardly hear Sirius screaming from a room away. He focused on his breathing exercises, the same exercises he used over a year ago when he started learning Occlumency on his own with Hermione. His flight on Buckbeak's back was the memory he chose now to focus with, Hermione squeezed him tightly from behind, and his life was so much simpler then.

His heart rate slowed noticeably, the drumming of his heart beat was no longer a personal metronome as he opened his eyes to see Sirius ten feet away gazing meaningfully at his godson.

"So, back from the ministry are you?" Sirius asked plainly, but the edge of his concern was palpable.

Harry removed his glasses and sighed, "Dobby!"

The little elf popped into the room, "Master Harry has called Dobby?"

Harry merely said, "Dobby can you grab me my contacts with the charms I worked on over Easter, I'm tired of these glasses."

Dobby popped away and Harry turned to Sirius, "Just give me a sec Paddy, I'll tell you when Dobby gets back."

Sirius' mouth quirked slightly but he nodded as the little elf returned with a small case of charmed contacts. Harry explained, "Considering I have no clue if I'll be involved in more battles today, I figured I'd best do this right now." Gingerly he placed the contacts in his eyes as he further explained, "A gift from Hermione, I'll never have to remove these, and they are enchanted so the spells can't be cancelled, even by Voldemort."

Sirius decided against tact, "Relax Harry, and tell me exactly what happened. You always ramble when the adrenalin is running, so give me the details and we can discuss your new eyewear later."

Harry's hands trembled as the adrenalin began to wash from his system, just as Sirius had said, "Let's go take a seat and I'll share."

Sirius reached over and squeezed Harry's shoulder gently, steering him into the parlor room, and the two nearest chairs.

Harry stated, "Well, Umbridge slipped me that portkey and I popped up in the ministry atrium, in the middle of a pile of dead ministry employees."

Sirius nodded and watched as Harry flexed his hand into a fist and pounded it down on the arm of the chair, "I am so bloody tired of Dumbledore and his half arsed idea of what passes for security."

Sirius patted his godson's see soothingly, "Save the recriminations for later kiddo, the Order has been called for a meeting later tonight."

Harry frowned, "I helped a few ministry people still hiding, trying to escape. The outbound Floo connections were still working, but based on my lack of support I assume inbound connections had been disrupted."

Sirius merely nodded as Harry continued, "I ran into the Carrows and Jugson in an anteroom off of the atrium, and I traded spells with them for about twenty minutes. I only realized in a break that they were herding me towards the Department of Mysteries."

Sirius grimaced, "The prophecy then." Rubbing at his eyes he pulled his wand and summoned a bottle of firewhiskey. Conjuring two large glasses he uncorked the bottle and poured both glass full before handing the glass to Harry. The pair both took large gulps of the noxious fluid, steam soon poured out of their ears before Harry swallowed thickly and stood up, taking his half-filled glass with him.

"So I knew what Voldemort's plan was by then of course, and being the idiot I was I decided to spring the trap, but only after seeing what kind of numbers he was working with." Harry began to pace restlessly, stopping only once to down the remainder of his firewhiskey.

"He had the entire bloody inner circle there, save for the Carrows and Jugson who were still looking for me. But, I knew that if I didn't show up the false prophecy wouldn't be heard." Harry said, becoming more agitated by the moment, removing his robes and un-tucking his uniform blazer haphazardly.

Sirius glanced out of the corner of his eye and noticed that Remus and Tonks had made an appearance, both watching but keeping their respective distance. They weren't sure if Harry was having a nutter, but they figured Sirius was the best equipped of anyone not named Hermione to avoid it, if at all possible.

Harry stopped pacing and continued in an odd tone of voice, "Of course Voldemort was furious when the Carrows and Jugson ran in to the prophecy room; they were pissing themselves about losing me."

Sirius nodded, "I'd imagine pissing themselves was the least of their concerns at that point kiddo."

Harry chuckled once, his face contorting into a sad example of a smile, "Voldemort sent them back to keep looking for me. That was my cue, my perfect opportunity to deal Riddle a loss, while minimizing the risk to myself."

Sirius had frozen in place as Harry continued in a pain filled whisper, "Oh...god, I tore out Jugson's throat in my animagus form, and I could taste his blood running into my mouth..." Harry snarled and threw his glass into the nearest wall, the explosion of glass led to splinters bouncing back into his face, but thankfully all missing his eyes.

Sirius stood and walked over to his godson, pulling him into a tight hug as Harry continued in a whisper, "Alecto was clean, piercing spell right through the back of the head. Amycus actually got a spell off, but it didn't matter, I looked into his eyes as his head exploded."

Closing his eyes again Harry felt the trickle of blood run from a gash in his forehead, before the cooling of a healing spell closed the cut with a wave of Sirius' wand. Sirius' grip relaxed and Harry stepped out of the hug.

Harry gingerly prodded at his newly healed flesh, a hyper acute almost perverse awareness of pain washed over him. Walking over to the wall he stepped close and put his hand through the wall with one straight punch, the pain serving as a focus now, forcing him to the end of his story.

"So, after killing three people I decided to take my odds against Voldemort and the 12 other inner circle members. In hindsight, not the best decision I've ever made. But, at the time I was just reacting to everything, after all it's saved me in the past nicely enough." Harry pulled his hand from the wall; the knuckles were scraped up, but not badly enough to deter him from continuing.

"He listened to the fake prophecy, and he seemed to buy it. After trading some pleasantries I decked Rabastan LeStrange and made my exit." Harry simplified the end, but he only planned to share the actual words with Hermione, after the storm had blown over.

Glancing over at Remus and Tonks Harry wryly added, "So that's basically how I wind down from an OWL exam. What has everyone else been up to?"

Sirius wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulder and led him towards the kitchen, "Let's grab a bite to eat, and you can hear what's going on thanks to the WWN. If she's still here then Evangeline can get some practice mothering you before Molly and Hermione show up."

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Hermione was thinking so much that for once she wished she could stop her mind from pondering the endless possibilities of her life. Even if she had supreme confidence in Harry's ability to survive, it didn't stop those whispers in her mind that always crept up when he found himself in the life and death type of situations. It had been two

years since she had joined him on one of these "end of the school year adventures", and she understood now that it was far worse not knowing than being in danger herself.

She blamed Dumbledore, she blamed Harry, she blamed Umbridge, and she blamed herself for everything that happened. She knew she should blame one other wizard more than the rest, but blaming Voldemort seemed to be an exercise in futility most of the time.

She'd even acted snippy with Dumbledore of all people, sure she thought the old wizard was constantly making the same mistakes over and over again, but that didn't give her license to act the way she had. If she was upset, Harry would be furious and that benefited no one, no matter how deserved or not it was. She would have to be fully supportive of Harry, but also able to work with Dumbledore, or the sacrifices of war would be meaningless.

Glancing around she noted that only those going to Grimmauld remained in the school, it had already been a long day; the last few OWL exams had been rushed through before the examiners had disappeared, promising that results would be posted as always, regardless of the fate in the ministry.

McGonagall was the one who walked over to the young witch, "Ms. Granger, we must be leaving in a moment, if we wish to get outside of the wards before the castle becomes lockdown."

Hermione frowned and began to walk away from the small alcove with the window overlooking the grounds of the castle. "I'm sure you'll hear all about what is happening once we reach the safety of headquarters." McGonagall said in a soothing tone of voice.

Hermione wordlessly followed her head of house, and took a hold of the portkey before the older witch tapped it with her wand, and they disappeared in a whirl of color.

As the two witches vanished it left the final sentient being within the whole of the Hogwarts wards, Dumbledore closed his eyes, feeling the full weight of actions he would be making over the coming months. While he fully intended on dying in a time of peace when the world

was in safe hands, he could make no guarantees of what would happen. Connecting with the wards one final time he tapped his own gnarled wand on his suitcase and vanished as the school which had housed nearly a million students became fully deserted for the first time in nearly a millennia.

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Harry sat in a chair around the small table that Sirius and Remus usually ate at during the quiet times of the year, munching on a sandwich from a large pile provided by Dobby.

The message continued to loop. Over and over again over the WWN:

The Ministry of Magic has fallen. Remnants of the government have relocated to France, where actions are being planned to repatriate the country by defeating the terrorist He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his followers, the Death Eaters. All remaining magical people must protect themselves and the statute of secrecy in any way that is safely possible. The goblins of Gringotts have transferred all accounts and contents thereof to the continent, the branches within Britain have been closed until further notice.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has already begun evacuation, and will remain closed as long as the war continues. Beauxbatons school and Durmstrang school have already signed reciprocity agreements with Hogwarts, so free transfers will be allowed for the coming school year. Students who have taken the OWL and NEWT examinations will receive their scores whenever it is safe to do so. Files of scores will be available for students who wish to view them at the exiled ministry, and any potential transfer schools.

Witches and wizards should find their way out of Britain through muggle means of travel, repeat magical travel is no longer safe....The Ministry of Magic has fallen....

Harry shook his head at everything the message had said, each new point raised was just another indictment against the ministry and its practices over the last 20 years at the minimum, likely expanding

much further back than that. Of course for each thing the announcement said, more telling were the things not mentioned.

"So, in essence the ministry suggests everyone leave the country until the brains that just got outmaneuvered by said Dark Lord miraculously figure out a way to defeat him. Then it's a simple matter to figure out a way to retake the country with no tangible resources beyond a limited auror force." Harry stated as he rolled his eyes.

Remus fielded the statement, "A limited auror force that would have been completely wiped out in the attack on the ministry. Additionally, several obliviators and all of the vetted unspeakables also made it out safely. The government in exile has a chance to gather aid under a national banner, and they have the advantage of depriving those resources to Voldemort. So, compared to prior ministry decisions, I'd say this ranks up somewhere between genius, and fully competent."

Harry scowled fiercely and was about to reply when Sirius added, "You need to take a breather for a few minutes Harry, go upstairs and get unpacked and write up a game plan for the Order meeting tonight. I'll send Hermione along as soon as she gets here."

Harry nodded sharply and stomped out of the kitchen before Sirius turned to Remus, "Harry made some reasonable points Remus, just because we grew up amongst the logic and incompetence of this government doesn't mean everyone else did. There's a large difference between acknowledging that, and accepting it as a part of your government. It's something the rest of us like to delude ourselves over, but even my muggle hating parents understood that."

Remus looked startled by Sirius' well reasoned argument as he continued, "We are going to need both Harry's train of thought and Dumbledore's to win this war and have most of us survive to enjoy it. I'm not too proud to admit that, we need to get Harry to understand it too, or all of this is going to be for naught."

Remus frowned, "Harry is a remarkable young wizard, but..."

Sirius cut him off, "The prophecy Remus, you have two incredibly determined and talented wizards that have opposing goals. The fake prophecy might buy us a few months before Voldemort convinces himself that he is powerful enough to buck the entire thing. Harry doesn't even have that luxury and he just faced Voldemort down, again surrounded by the inner circle without giving up the game. I've lost two damned good Potters to that bastard already, and that's not including Charlus and Dorea, Harry isn't going to die in this war. So, we need to convince him to swallow his pride, and work with Dumbledore to make this all happen."

Remus didn't respond other than to stare thoughtfully at his friend, before he nodded once and finally replied, "Well, there's only one person that can get Harry to see reason before the meeting, and when she gets here, you already said you were sending her along."

Sirius smirked in response, "If I knew that being logical and full of deep thoughts would be enough to make you shot your gob, I'd have done it ages ago."

Remus didn't respond verbally but the loaf of bread that hit Sirius in the face a moment later seemed to communicate his thoughts on the matter quite admirably.

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Hermione landed softly next to McGonagall as the pair landed in the Parlor room of Grimmauld Place, the entry point for Order members and their families for the remainder of the war. Instead of waiting for the Professor to lead the way Hermione sprinted into the kitchen, the informal meeting place for the Marauders in the house.

As she entered the room Sirius merely said, "Upstairs in his room, try to talk some sense into him."

Hermione's heart nearly exploded in relief at the words as she spun on her heel and nearly bowled over Professor McGonagall as she darted towards the stairs, a muffled; "excuse me" was her only concession to manners.

She found her quarry in the suggested spot, unpacking rather haphazardly as Dobby helped when he could, keeping the room from turning into an absolute disaster area. Harry barely had time to brace himself before he caught Hermione in his arms, sending both of them tumbling onto his soft mattress.

Harry laughed softly before Hermione sealed her lips to his in a desperate embrace that lasted for several long minutes.

As the frantic snog ended Harry sat up, with Hermione still attached to his lips and he gently disentangled from his girlfriend, "Pretty wild day, eh?"

Hermione took a deep shuddering breath, her hair an even more wild mess than normal, starting and stopping in an effort to find the right words. Finally she settled on, "You look amazing with your contacts in."

Harry laughed freely at this, "I'm amazed at how the brightest witch of her age is so easily sidetracked."

Hermione shoved on his shoulder in response to push away, and she crossed her legs to get a real serious look at her boyfriend. "So, what happened at the ministry?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair, "Short version for now. I'll be giving the full version again at the Order meeting tonight."

Hermione didn't even blink at the news of an Order meeting as Harry plainly stated, "I killed the Carrows and Jugson, and was stupid enough to walk into the middle of the inner circle without back up. The fake prophecy worked well enough that I managed to escape, and here I am now."

Hermione looked at Harry with a frown, "I don't think I like how blasé you are about killing three people."

Harry snapped in his reply, "Well what the bloody hell am I supposed to do, I've already broken things and that didn't make me feel any better."

Hermione took one of his hands between her smaller hands and gently said, "I want you to trust me enough to tell me how you feel. I know that isn't easy for you, but that is more a gender shortcoming for men than anything special to you Harry."

Harry frowned, "I'm just angry, not that I had to kill them as much, because I know that it's going to happen again. But, that I'm forced to do these things at all."

Harry's eyes pleaded with Hermione to listen without interrupting, "I'm not exactly happy about killing anyone, but I reckon they would be just as happy to do the same to my friends and family...and I can deal with that sacrifice if it means I can save everyone I love."

Hermione smiled softly turning his hand and kissing the palm gently, "I can't say I completely understand, simply because I haven't been forced to make that decision. But, never feel that you can't tell me everything, because amongst other things, I've found I'm a pretty good listener."

Harry nodded and squeezed her hand before rolling off of his bed and walking over to the enchanted window in his room. It had been a project over the Easter holiday break, crafting the proper ward stones to have a permanent view of Taino beach in the Bahamas.

Seeing a beach across an entire ocean was proof that in some ways magic made anything possible, of course with anything possible the potential for terrible things was increased greatly. Harry smiled wryly to himself, he was quickly becoming jaded, and he didn't really know what to think of it. Becoming jaded was a strange sensation, because he still clearly remembered a time when he thought nothing could be worse than living with the Dursleys. It was hard not to see all of the horrible things magic could do right now, the blood of the three seemingly still on his hands.

This wasn't the world of unicorns and friendly giants he remembered so fondly, instead now it was quickly becoming a world of blood, pain, and death. The wonder, beauty, and innocence of his childhood was

quickly being replaced by something else, much darker and it all honesty it scared him.

Hermione silently climbed off the bed and stood next to him, offering her comfort, strength, and presence during his tumultuous thoughts.

"D'you remember the feeling when we were sitting in that room, waiting to be told we could go in and get sorted?" Harry asked quietly, but with a strengthening resolve.

Hermione closed her eyes and smiled softly, "I was terrified, sitting there mumbling all of the answers to the text books, figuring we were about to be tested to see if we qualified."

Harry laughed softly, "I don't remember one specific thing, but more that everything was coming at me so quickly. I was told that I was a celebrity in a bar, and I had no real idea why I was famous. I get on the train and I was making enemies and friends without even trying to. The chocolate frogs, Ron's dirty face, a bossy cute little witch, and Draco Malfoy acting much more important than he actually was."

Hermione nodded, her eyes still closed as Harry murmured, "It was so much simpler then."

Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist, "We were 11 years old, and it's not that everything was simpler but that we only saw what we wanted to. If we knew then what we know now things would have been a lot more complicated. Let's not play the "what if" game, it's a waste of energy, and perfectly good time to get some quality alone time in."

Harry spun Hermione until her face was looking at him as he smirked, "What kind of quality time did you have in mind?"

Hermione snuggled her face into his shoulder, "Let's go to the library and read a book by the fireplace. It's bloody June in London and this house is still colder than Hogwarts. Maybe Dobby or Winky can get us some cocoa, and we can just relax until the Order meeting."

Harry merely nodded, taking Hermione's hand in his left hand as he flicked his wand with his right, all of his remaining things going to the proper places. He had to gather his thoughts, because the meeting in a few hours was going to set the tone for many things to come.

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Albus Dumbledore had immediately left the safety of the castle to one of his own specific safe houses that he had constructed should such a catastrophe occur. There was the magical world he the way wished it was, and there was the oftentimes sad parody of the utopian society he had envisioned in his youth that actually existed. Truly good people, those that actually cared about others were a rarity in the magical world for some unfathomable reason.

Fawkes trilled a single note and Dumbledore answered, "Of course you can still get into the castle old friend. The founders had no interest in warding the castle from the majesty of a phoenix, or the headmaster that shut down the castle in the first place."

Fawkes trilled again and Dumbledore sighed heavily, "So much death and destruction, and to what end? Even if the prophecy favors Tom, he will still fail in the end and our society will likely die as a result."

Shaking his head he glanced over at his pensieve, "There is much that needs to be investigated. For now, it falls upon me to keep Britain from completely drowning in evil, in time Harry will have the experience necessary to take the torch."

Fawkes didn't reply this time and Dumbledore stroked his beard in thought, "Are you prepared to make a trip to headquarters en route to Paris?"

Fawkes trilled and Dumbledore smiled softly, "Without you my friend, the world would seem a much lonelier place." Fawkes swooped to his shoulder, as the phoenix landed the pair flashed away in a trail of fire.

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Order portkeys were being used continuously, as Grimmauld was slowly filling up in anticipation of the meeting to come. The remaining Weasleys had all filed in; apparently the Burrow was now under a Fidelius, and they wouldn't need to move into Grimmauld Place after all.

Sirius always found himself caught between being a gracious host, and a soldier at arms during the meetings. Evangeline had returned from her place, she had long ago begun to move in to his room and the house in general. Today she had finished the moving in, and he officially had a live in girlfriend, soon to be fiancé.

Harry and Hermione were in the far corner of the room, near Dumbledore's usual seat, and they were quietly discussing something. The pair had disappeared for a few hours, but when they reappeared right before the others began to portkey in, Harry had lost the agitation and anger he had been carrying around earlier.

He was eternally grateful that Harry had found his own strong and fierce woman, the same girl that had saved him from death a few years ago, was developing into a truly formidable witch, like Lily in so many ways, and yet different in many ways also. Harry, he looked almost like a spitting image of James at this point in his life, but as time had progressed that was almost the only thing he shared with his father.

It was a disservice to both of the Potter men he knew well to compare them; they both possessed, and in Harry's case still possessed, traits in abundance that made them great equally great but distinctly different men. He could never let James' memory go, simply because James was such a large part of making him the man he was today. The wave of melancholy that always struck him when he thought of James was muted today, not due to lack of care, but rather to other pressing concerns.

Remus slapped Sirius on the back to break him from his musings, "Are you ready for this old dog?"

Sirius smiled wryly, "I doubt I'll ever be fully ready for another war Remus, but at least the shadow games Voldemort was playing have

come to an end. It's a bit easier fighting an enemy that everyone is aware of, and knowing exactly what the stakes are."

Remus nodded thoughtfully, "I imagine that's the long and short of it." Gesturing with his head to Tonks he added, "I've got to grab the empty seats by Harry and Hermione; Tonks wanted a front row seat for the fireworks."

Sirius shook his head in exasperation, Remus was in many ways the most mature of the marauders when they were going through school, but he also had a disturbing knack for finding levity in situations where it didn't belong. It was one of Remus' character traits that allowed him to joke about being a werewolf, but sometimes it also led to him making comments in poor taste.

As the room slowly filled, Sirius looked around to see how the groups were settling into place geographically. The Weasleys, save for Percy, were all in a group with Ron and Ginny on the far end, nearest to Harry and Hermione. Bill was in his rightful place next to Molly, with his fiancé, Fleur Delacour on his other side.

The older crowd had actually seemed to divide somewhat, with Moody and McGonagall taking the two seats between the Weasleys and Harry's little group. Evangeline was on the far side of Dumbledore's seat, saving his own seat for right next to the older wizard. On the other side of the leader of the Order, Harry sat with Hermione's hand intertwined loosely with his own.

The few other aurors and ministry employees were also scattered throughout the room, whether that was by design, or just happenstance he couldn't guess.

Deciding he had played host for long enough, Sirius walked over to his seat and sat down. Evangeline took his hand with a smile and was about to speak, when the telltale flash of phoenix travel was seen, depositing Dumbledore in his seat at the head of the table. He seemed somewhat surprised to see Harry sitting directly to his left, but quickly covered it as he organized a pile of parchments, making his final preparations before calling the meeting to open.

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Amelia Bones looked at the map and watched as numerous portkeys were triggered, but disappeared somewhere over London, instead of tracking them to their final destination, "Someone's holding a large meeting under the Fidelius."

Scrimgeour plainly stated, "That would be Dumbledore's little Order of the Phoenix. As it stands, I imagine he has to have a better store of resources and fighters than we do."

Amelia merely nodded, "Yes, and so you are well aware, I do have a meeting planned with Dumbledore tomorrow. He mentioned that you and any other department heads remaining are encouraged to attend."

Rufus sighed and rolled his neck, a few snaps could be heard, "Thank heavens for little miracles then. I'll see what I can do about taking this issue before the ICW at their next quorum meeting."

Amelia didn't reply as she watched the map, the occasional light signifying unforgivable curses being used, or portkeys being activated through the country. The world was a changed place, and it would be a monumental task to regain that which was now lost to all of them.

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Dumbledore didn't even bother to stand as he merely stated, "Let us bring this meeting to open. I won't even bother with an agenda, this is primarily a fact finding meeting, and to determine our next steps in combating the Dark Lord and his followers. Sirius?"

Sirius rubbed at his eyes tiredly, "I've been locked up here all day, but I believe Harry could better brief you on the events occurring at the ministry."

Dumbledore merely gestured with his hands and Harry spoke, "In short, I was portkeyed against my wishes to the ministry by Delores Umbridge."

Dumbledore interjected, "Madam Umbridge was under the imperius curse, and thusly is not responsible for her actions. Please continue."

Harry looked annoyed, "I arrived at the ministry in the atrium, by my count I saw at least 75 dead bodies throughout the room, of ministry employees that had offered resistance to Riddle and his forces. The room must have been the place of a large set piece battle; I only counted 5 dead in death eater robes and masks, so it appeared to be rather one-sided."

Many in the Order looked concerned; the ministry was the largest employer in the country, so odds were high that they had all lost family and friends in the attack.

Snape spoke up, which in its own right was a rare occurrence for the meetings, "The Dark Lord only has use for those that swear their fealty. If I had to hazard a guess, I would assume the atrium was being used as the site for corpses throughout the ministry. They would have the dual effect of serving as a warning to those ministry personnel fortunate enough to escape through the outward Floo connections."

Harry nodded once, "That is equally plausible to my theory Professor Snape." Snape gestured with his hand and Harry continued, "I was able to aid nearly twenty scattered ministry employees escape, by engaging various death eaters as they took those outward Floo connections."

Dumbledore once again interjected, "My apologies Harry, but it might be helpful for me to explain the nature of the Floo connections at the ministry."

Harry shrugged and Dumbledore explained, "The ministry is the setting for the vertices of the various Floo sub routes. In essence all traffic is directed through the ministry, making it impossible to completely shut off outbound Floo travel without shutting down the entire system for a long period of time. Apparently, Tom believes he can capture more people through unauthorized Floo travel, than the scattered ministry personnel that managed to evade his forces."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, "After nearly an hour of aiding those that I could find, I ran into a spot of trouble. Namely, I had three inner circle members that seemed to find great pleasure in chasing me around the ministry with unforgivable curses flashing around my head. For those of you wondering, it was the Carrows and Jugson that took an interest in tormenting me."

Moody grunted, and all of the older Order members looked as concerned as possible, considering it was obvious Harry had managed to escape somehow.

Harry continued, oblivious to the murmurs through the room, "I finally figured out that there was a rhyme to their reason for engaging me. They were herding me, herding me towards something that Riddle wanted me to be there for."

Dumbledore frowned and murmured, "The prophecy."

Harry nodded, "They were herding me towards the Department of Mysteries, I would see the occasional dead ministry employee at this point, but the building seemed more deserted than destroyed by this time."

Dumbledore glanced over at Harry after a silence of a few seconds and he commented, "So, we can safely assume that if Tom kept the destruction to a minimum, he has designs on using the ministry building in some capacity. Likely, it will be one of his main points to consolidate power from."

Harry continued his narrative, "At this point, I believe it would be safe to say I committed a tactical error. Instead of escaping, with the knowledge that Riddle wanted to unveil the prophecy to me, I decided to play right into his hand and listen to it. However, I wasn't going to do so without exacting some sort of loss on his forces."

Moody growled, "You messed up Potter, never fight a battle where you don't have the tactical advantage."

Harry laughed hollowly, "I guess you don't know nearly as much about me as you thought then Moody. I've been running head long into low odds my entire life."

Harry shook his head and exhaled deeply, "I managed to sneak in to the Department of Mysteries and listen in on Voldemort, gaining any additional intelligence I could before springing his trap. After listening in for a few minutes, he managed to manipulate our connection to verify that I was at least still in the ministry building. It was then that an opportunity presented itself to inflict some losses on Voldemort where it would hurt the most, his inner circle."

Molly softly protested, "Harry, you shouldn't have to."

Harry smiled wanly, "I agree, but then again no one should have to." Harry shared a long look with Hermione before continuing, "The Carrows and Jugson were once again sent out to look for me with the knowledge I was still inside the building. Keeping my cover I followed them until they were isolated, and I killed all three of them before they could hit me with a spell."

Moody looked more impressed now then disappointed, he had battled the Carrows back in the first war, and he could plainly attest to why the pair was known as the demon twins by those in the auror forces.

Dumbledore just looked tired, but there was no disapproval in his face, "What occurred next Harry?"

Harry shrugged, "I walked into the inner circle and listened to Riddle talk for awhile before he opened the prophecy orb. The fake prophecy gave him pause for a moment, and I managed to escape using the same method of travel that I had snuck around with."

Dumbledore remained silent for a long time before he softly said, "Thank you for sharing with us Harry." He glanced back to his right, "Evangeline, do you have anything to share?"

The next to speak was Kingsley Shacklebolt, "I can add a little detail to what happened at the ministry. The Minister, Madam Bones, and a

few others managed to flee as the attack started, in an attempt to keep a functioning government without the taint of Voldemort. Rough estimates by the few clean aurors left I helped to evacuate put casualties at around 120, with several others choosing service over death. I believe the highest ranking ministry employee to die was Barty Crouch Sr., although he apparently took out three death eaters singlehandedly before he was pacified."

Dumbledore rubbed his brow, "Thank you Kingsley. Alastor?"

Moody grunted, "Well, Potter accomplished a lot more than anyone else today, but I did manage to place some tracking charms on some of the first ones in at the ministry, before my emergency portkey activated. Back to Potter, I'm feeling sight bit better about today, knowing I won't have to stare down the wand of the Carrows. You've done everyone a service lad."

Harry acknowledged Moody with an uncomfortable looking nod and Dumbledore cleared his throat, "You've place the appropriate charms on the tracking board, as per our custom Alastor?"

Moody merely grunted and Dumbledore continued down the line, few others had little details to offer, and none of them were of the good variety.

As he reached the end of the group Dumbledore nodded, "Very well, thank you all for providing what information we have managed to obtain. It shall make our next moves the most beneficial."

Harry spoke up, "What moves would those be Professor?"

Dumbledore simply replied, "That has yet to be determined Harry. Patience is our greatest ally at this point."

Harry was not to be dissuaded, "Patience is one of the primary reasons Riddle has taken the power he has. Patience has led to the deaths of thousands of good people, Dumbledore. Why don't we disrupt each of his carefully crafted little plans, by not being patient for once? Why don't we gather intelligence and make a move that will hurt him for once."

All at once, the quiet murmurs from earlier turned to outrage, mainly in shrieks of protest, or strangely enough several shouts of agreement, the latter was especially prevalent amongst the Weasley family.

Dumbledore raised his hand for quiet and slowly he was obeyed, "I understand your feelings Harry, but we needn't lose more of our number to violence, before we are ready."

Harry sighed heavily, "Professor, if we wait until Riddle is entrenched it will be too late to do anything but start over in a new country. If we can disrupt him now, simply by sabotaging whatever plans we can and then escape before they can figure out what happened; we then have the possibility of keeping him tied up until we can put together a real offensive. That offensive would have a real chance of success if we can keep him from preparing, for as long as possible. Politically, you need to fight that battle on a different battleground than the rest of us will."

Dumbledore was completely flabbergasted, not so much by Harry's word, but by the unyielding stare Harry kept directly on him as he spoke his words.

"What would you have me do Harry?"

Harry sighed, "The way I see it sir, you are going to be the most important part of this war for our side, at least until the very end. We need you to tell the world what has happened here, and I need personally need you to help me gather all of Riddle's objects."

Dumbledore glanced up to Fawkes, who was roosted on the top of his high backed chair, the phoenix trilled once, "We will need to reorganize the Order to accommodate the conditions you seek Harry."

Harry replied, "In all honesty sir, the kind of missions I have planned will be volunteer only, and not obligation to drive volunteers. The Order is perhaps the best information gathering force we have at our

disposal, and while I might wish it otherwise all but those in the auror squads will be best used to that end."

Dumbledore nodded, "Any further suggestions, Harry? I dare say you have everyone's attention at this point."

Harry smiled slightly, "Tomorrow sir, we can discuss how to best accomplish both of our goals. For now, why don't we concern ourselves with what we can do right now?"

Dumbledore smiled tiredly, "Quite right Harry." Looking at the assembled members Dumbledore knew in his heart that many of those present would not be alive in a year's time.

"Alastor, I expect your level best discretion at gathering a team to determine the scope of the Dark Lord's operation. Observe any potential weaknesses you can, and plant as many of your special branch of listening charms. I would like an intelligence report in my hands in 48 hours time." Dumbledore ordered.

Moody grunted and nodded his agreement, a slightly manic gleam in his eyes, which only those that were close friends knew of its meaning.

The Order members all looked expectant at Dumbledore for his next words, "Harry, tomorrow we shall meet, and I expect you to have a list of tactics you will employ to accomplish a standard mission for your goals. If we go to war, you will need to understand some of the realities of which you may not be aware. Few here know this, but I was in a special magical forces division during the early stages of World War II. A group tasked with similar tasks as to which you allude. I expect tangible results, if I am to turn this responsibility over to you."

Harry bowed his head respectfully, he knew now that the next time he slept would only be after his meeting tomorrow.

Dumbledore stood and for once, he looked the part of the general preparing his troops for war, "The shadow war that we have fought for the past year against the Dark Lord and his forces is now over. If any of you present wish to leave the country, now is the time to tell

me. I will release you from your oaths, because I can not in good conscience tell any of you one truth. This war that we now must undertake, may end in the deaths of every single one of us present. If that price is too high, please speak to me after I adjourn the meeting."

Scanning the group once more he finished, "If we must go to war, let it begin in earnest now. Our next meeting will be called through our standard measure of patronus message, Severus I expect you to devise a code to encrypt these messages with. I hereby adjourn this meeting, may god have mercy on us all."

Harry was the first out of the room, with Hermione close behind, the war to come would test all of them beyond their limits. Thus began the period of magical history, which would later be referred to as, The Blood War.

A/N: There it is folks, the end of OYE: OOTP. I can't really tell you anything about the next part of the series aside from the title.

Open Your Eyes: The Blood War

Question of the chapter:

If you had to pick one part of Deathly Hallows that was your favorite, what would it be?

Please leave a review on your way out and tell me what you thought of the chapter and story. Thanks to all of you that have read, and have left a review over the course of this one, each and every review is much appreciated.